The New Criterion

October 1992

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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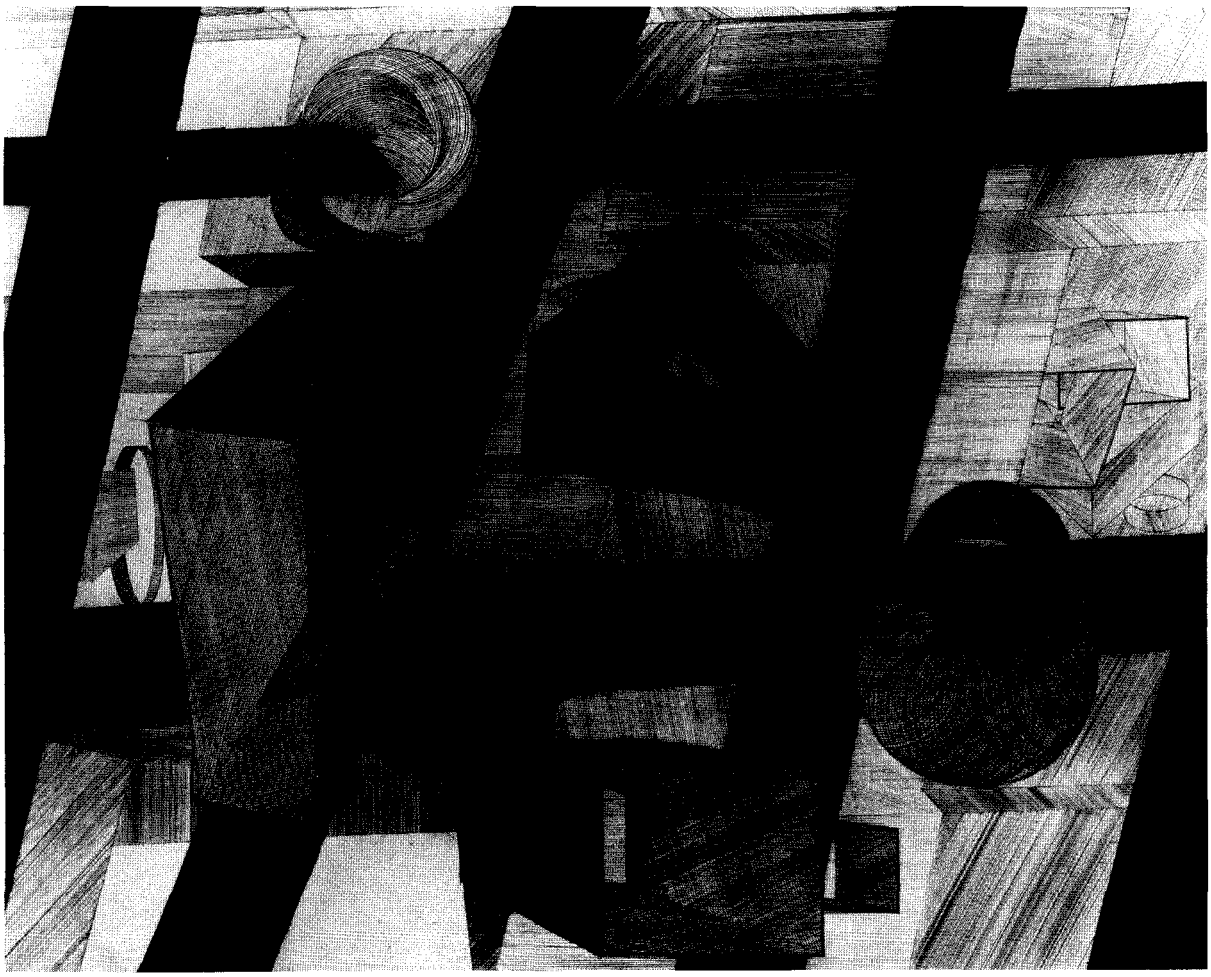

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A L H E L D

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Notes & Comments: October 1992

The Dutch bid a tearful farewell to art welfare

There are times when other people's troubles offer an illuminating perspective on our own. Take the case of the Dutch government program for acquiring contemporary works of art and otherwise subsidizing huge numbers of living artists at public expense. Begun in the 1950s, this program had grown to elephantine proportions by the 1980s, when it is estimated that the state was buying some twenty thousand works a year. Even this figure, moreover, does not really convey the scope of this public art policy, for municipal governments in the Netherlands are said to have acquired even more work than the central government. Public agencies also reimbursed artists for the costs of their materials. One result was to turn the country into a paradise for artistic mediocrity. Another was to create a storage problem on a gigantic scale. Now that the program has been dismantled, the Ministry of Culture in the Hague faces the daunting problem of dispersing its enormous stock of art works, and it turns out that the public, for whose benefit this program was allegedly created, doesn't want the stuff. The bulk of it cannot even be given away, for there aren't enough takers. Meanwhile the artists —or "artists"—who benefited from all this government largesse have woken up to the dynamics of the market economy and are complaining that the Ministry of Culture is creating unfair competition for them by offering their work free to anyone who will take it off the state's hands. Both the comedy and the tragedy of a policy that turned government funding of art into a welfare program are now plain for everyone to observe.

That this was, in its essentials, a welfare program masquerading as a public art program can no longer be doubted. In a recent report on this cultural fiasco in *The New York Times*, the official in charge of dispersing this immense horde of failed art—Heleen Buijs, who is said to be both an art historian and a lawyer—openly acknowledged that "people who did the buying included welfare officials. Their main criterion was often whether the artist needed the money, rather than judging the attributes of the work." The whole ethos of the program precluded any possibility of applying standards of quality. The *Times* reported that "the intention was to exhibit the works to demystify art and make it less of an elitist experience." Yet in the end there was too much work to exhibit, and, indeed, too much even for the government's capacious storage facilities. "Stuff was arriving by the containerful," according to Heleen Buijs, thus "tying up costly storage space, air conditioners, computers, and staff."

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So successful, moreover, was the government's demystification program that, as the *Times* reported, "giving away [the] art is not proving to be easy." Public venues for these works are already overstocked. "Many art libraries, museums, and other public buildings are already filled to overflowing . . . and town halls across the country have also begun emptying their cupboards by donating or returning the objects." What Heleen Buijs was too discreet to say, of course, is that this ill-judged, spendthrift art policy has also—and devastatingly—had the effect of reducing the life of art in Holland to a condition of aesthetic ruin and public ridicule. Which is no doubt why, in the best Dutch museums that specialize in contemporary art, much of the work on public exhibition tends to be drawn from other countries. This "monument to socialist central planning at its most absurd," as some have called it, has effectively stripped the contemporary Dutch art world of its place on the international art scene.

Both the scale of the Dutch program and its governing ethos, which categorically repudiated standards of quality as undemocratic and elitist, have important lessons to teach us, too, about the way government policy on art should and should not be run. To separate public art programs from judgments of quality reduces the very idea of artistic achievement to absurdity. Yet without some standard of quality, which no government bureaucracy is capable of applying when it comes to the contentious arena of contemporary art, art itself becomes a meaningless activity. By comparison with the Dutch fiasco, our own public programs for contemporary art remain modest in scale but no more successful in their results. It is all yet another reminder that it may be the better part of wisdom in a democratic society for the government to stay out of the field of new art altogether. In Holland, meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture continues to deny that it has any plans to burn what the *Times* report characterizes as "piles of unwanted art." In that dilemma the demystification program for art has come to its inevitable denouement.

John Cage, 1912-1992

It is not easy to write an obituary for a figure in the arts whose work we do not admire. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum* applies even to John Cage, the American avant-garde musician (though it is not absolutely clear that the term musician applies to him) who died in August in New York at the age of seventy-nine. A laudatory *New York Times* obituary by Allan Kozinn, beginning on the front page and taking up most of another page, amply demonstrated just how important he was seen to be in the New York arts world; a reverent Sunday "Arts & Leisure" piece by John Rockwell, the *Times*'s roving European cultural correspondent, found Cage to be a hero in the thinking person's Europe. All in all, the reaction to Cage's death merely echoed the words of the introductory paragraph of his entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*: "he has had a greater impact on world music than any other American composer of the 20th century." With only Stephen Foster and John Philip Sousa to compete with in the nineteenth century, and with Aaron Copland seemingly out of the running, the compliment seems hardly to require any temporal qualification.

By now, the accomplishments of Cage's busy and long life are well known. He wrote several hundred "compositions," ranging from works for pianos whose sound has been altered by the insertion of foreign objects between the strings, "music" produced by the random sounds of radios playing any kind of program at all, endless assemblages of taped sounds, beautifully calligraphed manuscripts of symbols drawn from astronomical charts, and, of course, the famous *4′ 33″*, a piano piece made up not of notes

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played on the keyboard but of complete silence. He said he loved both silence and noise; it seems almost cruel at this moment to remark that it was only music that made him uncomfortable.

He wrote a great many words as well. Some of it was rather on the lines of concrete poetry, gaining by layout what it lost in sense; a lot of it was pure gibberish. He was a marvelous storyteller, with a curiously riveting way of pacing what he had to say. When he spoke—and when he was understandable—it was often difficult to ignore the feeling that someone's ox was being gored; and Cage's "someone" was always, one felt sure, a pompous upholder of the dead music and the dead thoughts that people assumed to be cultured tend to admire and even love.

And yet, as these words are being written, it is difficult to avoid a feeling of sadness. Not really for Cage, since his humor had altogether too much of an edge on it to leave behind any feeling of regret; not really for the loss of any further artistic achievement on his part, since what he did, one feels sure, will, despite all the plaudits of middle-aged avant-gardists trying to recapture their youth, form but a chapter in the long history of American eccentricity.

The sadness produced by Cage's death is quite otherwise. It is a sadness for a world when high culture was the center of civilized life, when bootless inventions, even when dignified by the loosely applied term "art," were on the fringe, and when a joke about art could be seen as funny. Now, alas, we can hardly indulge such luxuries. Amidst the endless trivialities and the artificial multiculturalisms, the pops concerts and the TV sitcoms, John Cage, by some weird alchemy of media hype, has become what we are told to see as high culture. In sum, what is sad about John Cage's death is what he left behind: a legacy of mockery and disrespect for the values of aesthetic seriousness and order.

At least we still have Bach.

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How not to write about art

by Roger Kimball

. . . middlebrow culture attacks distinctions as such and insinuates itself everywhere, devaluating the precious, infecting the healthy, corrupting the honest, and stultifying the wise. Insidiousness is of its essence, and in recent years its avenues of penetration have become infinitely more difficult to detect and block.
—Clement Greenberg, 1948

Such persons are in fact besotted with words, and their brains are turned with the glittering, but empty and sterile phantoms of things. . . . They may be considered as hieroglyphical *writers. Images stand out in their minds isolated and important merely in themselves, without any ground-work of feeling. . . .*
—William Hazlitt, 1821

If nothing else, the explosion of public interest in art over the last few decades has taught us that philistinism is the chameleon of intellectual vices. It can counterfeit anything. And here as elsewhere, the practice of counterfeiting not only disseminates forgeries, it also compromises the original. Let the genuine achievements of art be ever so severe or demanding: within a season or two one can be sure of finding them mimicked, reduced to a formula, which means hollowed out, travestied, divested of aesthetic vitality and appeal. The essential components of this process were in place by the early 1960s, when philistine culture learned to celebrate—and to ape—the gestures and outward conventions of the avant-garde. No longer was establishment taste the reliable opponent of advanced culture: it became its automatic celebrant and ally.

One curious effect of this development was the transformation of avant-garde sensibility itself into a version of philistinism. When novelty and rebellion emerged as *conventional* virtues—as primary factors in art-world accreditation—then the avant-garde was finished as an engine of important artistic innovation. It devolved into a species of social posturing, preserving the appearance of anger but lacking the vision of the models it imitated. The one constant was sentimentality, understood not necessarily as saccharine emotion but, as Wallace Stevens once put it, as a failure of feeling. Today, what generally passes as avant-garde taste is as unattractive but as common and aesthetically nugatory as nose rings.

Examples of this phenomenon are legion. Indeed, the domestication of the avant-garde is a defining irony of contemporary art-world culture (as distinct from the culture of contemporary art, which exists quietly apart from and largely in opposition to the official pieties of the art world). One of the most instructive instances concerns the fate and the contemporary reception of Abstract Expressionism. This quintessentially American art movement was probably the last to exercise a legitimate claim to the title of the avant-garde; certainly, it was the last to encounter serious opposition from the art establishment. And although the

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achievements of Abstract Expressionism look more and more limited as the years pass, it did make a genuine and lasting contribution to twentieth-century art. Recent critical responses to Abstract Expressionism perfectly illustrate the extent to which philistinism has triumphed over art. On the one hand, there are the sour, politicized varieties of philistinism: the philistinism that reinvents Abstract Expressionism as an instrument of Cold War propaganda, for example, or the more recent innovation proposing that Jackson Pollock's drip paintings are really about ejaculation and urination. On the other hand, there is the hagiographic philistinism that abandons all pretence of critical discrimination in order to embrace the vast repository of clichés that have grown up around the Abstract Expressionists and their art. April Kingsley's book, *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art*,[1] is an unadulterated specimen of the latter.

Among much else, *The Turning Point* reminds us that bad books come in different classes. Some are bad with redeeming features: flawed but valuable works that contain original research, say, or important insights or engaging writing or perspicacious summaries of unwieldy material. Others—many, many others—are bad in more thoroughgoing, and thus forgettable, ways: dreary, dime-a-dozen affairs effectively devoid of both panache and substance. Then there is that select class of books that are bad in an exemplary fashion. Unlike those of the first class, they conspicuously lack mitigating virtues; but unlike those belonging to the second, their faults seem to epitomize a trend, a tendency, a fashion. They are interesting not for what they tell us about their announced subjects but as *symptoms*. *The Turning Point* belongs to this last category. It contributes exactly nothing to our knowledge of Abstract Expressionism. But it does recapitulate, verbatim, as it were, an enduring brand of histrionic philistinism, and is therefore worth examining in some detail.

The press material accompanying this book informs us that Miss Kingsley is completing her Ph.D. at the City University Graduate Center and that, in addition to having acted as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, she has written art criticism for various journals, including *Art News* and *Artforum*. We are also informed that *The Turning Point* is Miss Kingsley's first book. One may hope that she will not be tempted to repeat the experiment any time soon. For *The Turning Point* is one of those books that is wrong in every respect: tone, substance, structure, execution, originating conception . . . What else is there? It is wrong in those respects, too. It is an object lesson in how not to write about art.

Let's start with Miss Kingsley's basic conception for the book. Her main idea is that the year 1950—the "turning point," she tells us, of the twentieth century—also marked a critical turning point for "the subsequent history of world art." Why? Because, according to her account, 1950 was the year that the group of artists we have come to know as Abstract Expressionists "all came together to play their parts . . . as if on cue, on a stage of international significance." And even though "during 1950 the artists and their public became aware that something extremely important was going on in New York, something that wasn't happening anywhere else," hitherto "the crucial importance of this particular year . . . has largely been perceived subliminally, if at all." To fill this startling lacuna, Miss Kingsley has offered readers a kind of diary. After a brief introduction, *The Turning Point* proceeds seriatim from January 1950 through December, a chapter devoted to each month (except the summer months, which are dealt with collectively in one chapter). Over the course of the book, Miss Kingsley provides potted biographies of a dozen major figures (Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, David Smith, Willem de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Arshile Gorky, *et alii*),

1 *The Turning Point: The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art*, by April Kingsley; Simon & Schuster, 416 pages, $30.

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rehearses the major exhibitions they had that year, and provides a great deal of gratuitous sermonizing about (1) the anxiety produced by the atomic bomb and (2) the stupendous novelty and importance of Abstract Expressionism.

Unfortuntely, there are some problems with this account of Abstract Expressionism. One might, to begin with, wonder at the exalted critical empyrean that Miss Kingsley must inhabit to be blithely dispensing pronouncements about the influence of a contemporary art movement on "the subsequent history of world art." But perhaps, like so much else in this book, such talk is merely excited verbal static. Consider instead the tremendous importance that Miss Kingsley assigns to the year 1950. She asserts that 1950 was the year that most of the Abstract Expressionists discovered their "signature images." Really? Jackson Pollock's "signature image" was surely the drip painting, and he began making those in the late 1940s. If Robert Motherwell had a "signature image," it was the depiction of heavy black bars squeezing black ovoids on a white ground that figure centrally in the *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* series, and that image began appearing in his paintings in 1948. Not only did de Kooning achieve his "signature image" (or signature style, really) before 1950, but he also painted most of his best pictures in the Forties. Gorky, having committed suicide in 1948, was unavailable in 1950 when everyone was supposed to be turning out signature images. It does seem likely that Mark Rothko perfected his telltale image, a colored field with two blurry rectangles, one floating on top of the other, in 1950, but so what? If a group of artists emerges in the mid-1940s, it's hardly surprising that a handful of them should hit their stride in 1950.

Nineteen-fifty was also supposed to be the year in which the important artists associated with Abstract Expressionism had their first one-man shows. But here again some did and some didn't. Trying hard to create an atmosphere of existential ominousness, Miss Kingsley succeeds only in perpetrating monumental irrelevance. She opens her chapter for January by noting that on New Year's Eve, 1949, in Times Square "observers reported that there was virtually no drunkenness or kissing." Here we may be permitted to interject again with the one phrase above all others that this book calls forth: So what? Perhaps Miss Kingsley believes that this unusual sobriety had something to do with the spread of television or the fear of nuclear incineration: why else would she supply a footnote reporting that the number of television sets in this country went from 1.5 million in 1949 to 15 million in 1951 and that bombs and bombers were a "national obsession"?

In any event, it would seem that nuclear bombs have remained something of an obsession for Miss Kingsley. She reverts to the subject often in the course of this book about Abstract Expressionism, claiming, for example, that "each in their separate ways, the American Abstract Expressionists found relevant images which did convey a sense of responding to the world that had been born with the bomb." She also dilates on the fact that President Truman authorized production of the hydrogen bomb in 1950 "for US 'security.'" (Why the scare quotes? What else does she think the bombs were for?) The rise of Senator McCarthy was still a few years off, but the specter of McCarthyism is too good a prop to leave out entirely, so Miss Kingsley drags it into the mix as well, making it, so to speak, an honorary 1950 phenomenon. In fact, 1950 is made to bear altogether too heavy a burden. After this book, it deserves a furlough. The contingency that Miss Kingsley's chosen year happens to be the midpoint of the century means . . . What? Why, nothing at all. To pretend otherwise—to speak of 1950 as a "turning point," "a fulcrum," etc.—is to descend from history to numerology.

If the underlying conception of this book is dubious, the tone that Miss Kingsley has chosen to employ in it is a disaster. She writes not as a scholar or critic but as a starstruck groupie. She also has some trouble

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with the English language. One of her favorite solecisms involves the word "ironically," which she employs as an all-purpose synonym for "coincidentally." Expatiating on that unwontedly sober New Year's Eve, for example, Miss Kingsley observes that, at a special service at Saint Patrick's Cathedral, a Reverend Broderick called on his congregation to help "bring back Christ to the world." "Ironically," she writes,

> two days later and a few blocks north of Saint Patrick's, Mark Rothko, a Jew born . . . forty-seven years earlier, opened an exhibition of paintings that Reverend Broderick would surely have found unacceptably hedonistic in their beautiful colors, and incomprehensible in their abstract forms, but which nevertheless had the effect of bringing, if not God, at least a profound spiritual sense back to art.

Leave the "profound spiritual sense" to one side for a moment. What's "ironical" about the fact that Rothko was having a show near Saint Patrick's? Nothing. But given Miss Kingsley's flirtation with bombs and bombers, it *is* perhaps ironical that they should play such a prominent role in her discussion. Although conceding that the idea might be "somewhat misleading," she early on compares Abstract Expressionism to a bombing mission as depicted in an old-time movie about World War II. Jackson Pollock is the "pilot," you see, and he and the rest of the crew are all characters out of Frank Capra. According to Miss Kingsley, the Abstract Expressionists can be understood as "the socially and ethnically balanced bomber crew":

> Jew and gentile, rich man and pauper, native son and immigrant—brawling and quarreling among themselves, yet all pulling together for victory. And there they are: Jackson Pollock, the Westerner in denim jacket and jeans, jaw set and brow furrowed, a cigarette dangling from his lips; Franz Kline, handsome, athletic, a head full of shaggy-dog stories and a warm handclasp for everyone; the dashing blond Dutchman Willem de Kooning . . .

and so on, *ad nauseam*. One has heard of Abstract Expressionism being described as artistic dynamite, but B-29s weren't really the thing at the Cedar Bar.

When she's not thinking about the likes of Gregory Peck, Miss Kingsley often takes a turn in the cloister. She is very big on the "profound spiritual sense" of Abstract Expressionism. Phony spirituality has always been a stock-in-trade of critics unresponsive to the aesthetic appeal of abstract art. Does a certain painting consist entirely of two red squares on a red ground? It must be about God's transcendent self-identity; or else it is about man's union with God in the unfolding of a trinitarian dialectic; or maybe it's about the alienation of the human spirit exiled from oneness by objectifying reason; or . . . You get the picture: it can be about anything that human invention can frame and boundless credulity will accommodate. True, some artists, including some that Miss Kingsley discusses, have abetted such gibberish: how nice, after all, to believe that one's painting of two red squares has as much spiritual resonance as the frescos decorating the Sistine Chapel. But gibberish, even when licensed by artists, remains gibberish. This is something Miss Kingsley has not fully appreciated. Her peroration offers a fair example of the breathless but empty religiosity she favors:

> Whether we go to these artworks for confirmation of our world view, be it harmonious or chaotically complex; whether for exaltation, as we formerly [!] went to church; or whether we simply seek the esthetic pleasures of the senses—whatever our reasons—we go on a pilgrimage of sorts, for we seek something outside ourselves.
>
> It seems fitting that three centuries after the religious pilgrims who founded America launched themselves on a voyage into the unknown, trusting only their God to bring them safely to a new world, our artists used the same terminology as a metaphor for their adventure into a whole new territory of art making.

Why does it "seem fitting"? What does

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Abstract Expressionism have to do with the Pilgrims? Moreover, did Abstract Expressionism really colonize "a whole new territory of art making"? Wasn't the essential ground already discovered by Cubism, abstract artists such as Kandinsky, Miró, and Mondrian, not to mention the intellectual and artistic innovations of Surrealism? The traditional metaphor of the artist as a "second god" has often been overworked by modern writers and artists seeking to endow their favorite works of art with special significance; in some cases, perhaps, the language of transcendence has been appropriate; but many writers proselytizing on behalf of Abstract Expressionism bought their religious rhetoric wholesale and dispensed it with unprecedented largesse. Miss Kingsley has got a barrelful, and she likes to spread it about by the fistful, often with a bit of Superman and cut-rate Freud thrown in for good measure. Sample: "Gripped by impulses that seem electrical, driven by inner, unconscious forces, and concentrating with a superhuman intensity of focus, Pollock finally realizes the dream of Western artists since Gauguin—to be a primitive in touch with the other world, in touch with God." Bully for him, of course, but what about the art?

Clearly, Miss Kingsley has swallowed the propaganda about Abstract Expressionism hook, line, and sinker. Here she is on Pollock again:

> Jackson Pollock fused an abstract style of expressionism forever in the public mind with the idea of the Great American Painter. For Americans, he was Soutine, Lautrec, and Goya put together, but above all he was our Van Gogh—pure in spirit, psychologically out of control, but a painter whose psychic energy poured through him and onto the canvas for all to feel.

In fact, most Americans still regard Pollock as a bit of a fraud, even if they wouldn't mind owning one of his paintings so that they could sell it. And how many Americans know who Soutine is, anyway?

Throughout her book, Miss Kingsley specializes in what we might call tabloid portentousness. "Death," she writes of Rothko, "was the only thing he could count on." And later: "On February 25, 1970, Rothko cut open the veins of his forearms to pour his life's blood out onto the floor of his church-like studio. How else transcend the physical and achieve the spiritual like the patriarch Abraham, with whom he identified?" How else, indeed.

Apart from some gossip she picked up from art-world friends, almost everything Miss Kingsley has to tell us in *The Turning Point* has already been told elsewhere and told better. Virtually all the art-historical material in the book has been more soberly set forth in such well-known books as Irving Sandler's *The Triumph of American Painting* (1970) and William Seitz's *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America*, which was written in the 1950s and published in 1983 with a foreword by Robert Motherwell. And the biographical material, such as it is, has been rehearsed in innumerable biographies. Nor can one rely on Miss Kingsley's critical judgments. She assures us that de Kooning "continues" to make successful paintings, when the sad fact is that de Kooning has produced almost nothing but senile doodles for decades. She extravagantly overrates the achievement of minor artists such as Franz Kline. She virtually ignores Clement Greenberg, by far the most important critic of the Forties and Fifties as well as the most penetrating and honest advocate that Abstract Expressionism ever found.

There certainly is room for a new look at Abstract Expressionism. But the unpalatable truth, completely unacknowledged by Miss Kingsley, is that *deflation* is the chief task facing critics concerned with Abstract Expressionism today. Even though Abstract Expressionism has faded somewhat from the art scene, the reputations of the main artists associated with the movement are still wildly inflated, as are the prices that their work fetches. Neither the aesthetic goals of Abstract Expressionism nor the potpourri of ideas and pseudo-ideas that informed it

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(automatism, sundry bits of aesthetic mysticism, scraps of existentialism) have been given the critical scrutiny they deserve. If Abstract Expressionism tends to look good compared to what came after it in the art world—Minimalism, Pop, Graffiti Art, and so on—that is mainly because Abstract Expressionism was possessed of a seriousness and ambition completely lacking in its successors.

But consider this: did Abstract Expressionism produce any *great* artists, artists on the level of, say, Matisse? The truthful answer is No. To hear Miss Kingsley tell it, however, Abstract Expressionism was the most important cultural phenomenon since, since . . . well, it's not at all clear that Miss Kingsley believes anything in the history of mankind was really quite so spectacular. "The painted world they invented," she purrs, "was apocalyptic, explosive, tension-wracked." Not only that, but the Abstract Expressionists seem to have been the first to discover and exploit some basic laws of nature. "Chance, gravity, and paint viscosity," Miss Kingsley writes, "were, *for the first time in the history of art*, important factors." Italics have been supplied so that the reader may savor this incredible statement properly. Miss Kingsley is everywhere more inveigled by the personalities of the artists she describes than by their work. "Not since the Renaissance," she writes, "has there been a group of artists whose real lives have been so fascinating." Their "real" lives: she knows or knew some of the principals in this story and she's here to give us the lowdown on what really happened. Perhaps the key to this book is that, in her own quiet way, Miss Kingsley is something of a surrealist. How else can one explain her critical opinions—for example, her judgment that Arshile Gorky's *Summation* (1947) "may someday rival Leonardo's large drawing of the *Saint Anne with the Virgin and Child* in London for the world's admiration"?

In the end, though, the real problem with *The Turning Point*—and the only reason, finally, to take it seriously—is that its inveterate philistinism is contagious. The bad judgments and silly analogies, the addiction to gossip and pervasive aroma of uncritical veneration: all are merely coefficients of a sensibility for which art is first of all a theater for the exhibition and exploitation of sentimentality. And sentimentality, whatever else can be said about it, is seductive. William Hazlitt would doubtless have regarded Miss Kingsley as a "hieroglyphical" writer, not only because she is "besotted with words" but also because her writing lacks any contact with reality, with what Hazlitt called the "ground-work of feeling." The failure is not, or not primarily, one of discernment, but of honesty. The evil of sentimentality is not that it indulges feelings but that it manufactures them. Philistinism, craving a substitute for experience, courts sentimentality in all its forms. If Miss Kingsley's sugary variety is one of the perennial favorites, it is chiefly because it is one of the least demanding. Were this a totally private vice, it might be left alone to indulge itself. But as Clement Greenberg observed many years ago, insidiousness is of its essence, and its effects are corrupting and stultifying.

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Maurice Baring & the good high-brow

by Joseph Epstein

In *The Puppet Show of Memory*, his autobiography, Maurice Baring mentions a cupboard set on the landing between the first and second floors of the country estate of his Russian friends the Benckendorffs, a cupboard filled with Tauchnitz novels of various ages and other splendid books, so that, on the way to bed, in the darkness, one could reach into the cupboard and always be certain of finding something good to read. Would any of Maurice Baring's fifty-odd books have qualified for that wonderful cupboard? But perhaps an anterior, and more rudimentary, question needs first to be asked, such as: Who was Maurice Baring?

Maurice Baring's is a name one generally meets connected in a secondary or tertiary way with larger names. There he stands in a photograph between his friends Chesterton and Belloc. Here he is drawn as a caricature by Max Beerbohm ("Mr. Maurice Baring," the caption reads, "testing carefully the Russian sense of humour," as a tall, stooped, mustachioed man stares into the entirely uncomprehending face of a moujik). There he pops up in the journals of A. C. Benson, Arnold Bennett, Virginia Woolf, and Chips Channon. Here he is in the letters of Evelyn Waugh and Lady Diana Cooper. There he is as a minor figure in the Ann Thwaite biography of Edmund Gosse. Here he is, on his own at last, in an admirable anthology of his vast writings, *Maurice Baring Restored*, lovingly (it does not go too far to say) edited and introduced by Paul Horgan. There he goes—gone, one might almost say, forever—in a somewhat chilly essay of the early 1970s by Edmund Wilson, "How Not to Be Bored by Maurice Baring," the title of which makes the problem sound perhaps more grueling than it in fact is.

In a letter written in 1859 from Berlin, where he was then a student, Henry Adams writes of doing business with the Baring Brothers Bank. It was into this family of merchant bankers, founded in 1740, that Maurice Baring was born in 1874, the seventh of eight children. In her recent biography of Baring,[1] Emma Letley, who is his grandniece, makes plain how powerful a family the Barings were: "well established in the City, at court, in European society." A Baring had served as Viceroy of India; another, a later, Baring was governor of Southern Rhodesia and then governor of Kenya; yet another Baring, a forceful man known for his statesmanship in Egypt, was called, in a pun that was as inevitable as it was irresistible, "Over-Baring." Only in a family of such furious achievers does Maurice Baring, with his continuous outpouring of books, seem rather unambitious.

Anyone anticipating a dark side to the Baring family's record of achievement will be disappointed. No devilish or besotted father lurks in the foreground, no sly and heavily cozening mother aft, venting her

1 *Maurice Baring: A Citizen of Europe*, by Emma Letley; Constable (London), 269 pages, £18.95.

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twisted frustrations on her children. The Barings were not only rather eminent but by most accounts quite nice Victorians. By his own account, Maurice Baring's upbringing was as bracing as the best champagne and twice as bubbly. He recalls his own boyhood as a fairyland. At Membland, one of the family's houses, there was a tennis court, a yacht, a steam launch, a telegraph, lovely food, a nearly continuous flow of interesting relatives and friends. "Welcome ever smiled at Membland," Maurice Baring wrote in *The Puppet Show of Memory*, "and farewell went out with a sigh."

A many-servanted household, the Baring's, and Maurice's early education came from a series of kindly governesses and servants. "I learned to read very quickly," he wrote, "in French first." His father spoke French, German, and Spanish, "not only easily, but naturally, without effort or affectation" (Maurice must have inherited his own facility with languages from him) and had much poetry by heart. His mother was musical. Culture was in the oxygen among the Barings. "I believe children absorb more *Kultur* from stray grown-up conversation they hear than they learn from books," wrote Baring, himself the recipient of vast quantities of such culture. Ronald Knox thought Maurice Baring seemed the least absorbed and the most retentive of readers. His nature, Knox wrote, "was one which constantly absorbed, as it constantly exuded, something which (for want of a less abused word) you can only label 'culture.'"

Maurice Baring, whose dates are 1874-1945, lived through a remarkable stretch of history, having been old enough to have met men who fought at Waterloo, to have had an aunt who played her harp for Lord Byron, to have had other relatives (intense verbal conservatives) who preferred to say cowcumbers instead of cucumbers, to have seen Sarah Bernhardt when she was in her prime, to have been a boy when *Treasure Island* was first published. With a generous father, a mother whose favorite he was said to have been, the best schooling, many natural gifts, not least among them a felicitous talent for friendship, Maurice Baring would seem to dispute Hemingway's dictum that the first requisite for a writer is an unhappy childhood.

And yet a shadow falls across some of the things that Maurice Baring wrote, as it seems to have fallen across his life, that makes one wonder if, in a reflective and largely spectatorial life, even all the advantages are sufficient. Not that Baring ever complained. Not from him do you hear the by now almost standard English literary rant about that absolute hell that was school days. Although not an athlete, Baring enjoyed Eton, as he wrote in an essay in *Lost Lectures*, "whole-heartedly and unreservedly: I enjoyed it all from the first to the last moment." The "tyranny of the intellect," as he referred to it, did not prevail at Eton; he claimed that "rule of the intellect is far severer than that of athletes." What did prevail was the freedom the school gave to its students to go off and do pretty much as they wished. Along with freedom went a sweet eccentricity, of the kind provided by such masters as Arthur C. Benson, who "would have preferred Shakespeare to have written novels" (it's an interesting notion), and the Vice Provost, F. W. Warre Cornish, who, as Baring would later write, "pulled some of the weeds, or did his best to, out of my mind and taught me things that were worth knowing in life." Baring won the Prince Consort Prize while at Eton for work in French. He was a lifelong champion of the school, and said of it that "Eton teaches those who teach themselves," which is, of course, the best that any school can hope to accomplish.

After Eton, Baring went off to Cambridge, where, Miss Letley says, "he was on the edge of the small intellectual world of the Society of Apostles." At Cambridge Baring kept his literary aspirations for the most part under wraps. When the Baring Brothers Bank suffered a serious reversal, the plan was for Maurice to enter the Diplomatic Service. This meant passing quite difficult examinations in a number of dif-

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ferent subjects—among them mathematics of a fairly serious kind—as well as being questioned orally in French, German, and Italian. To prepare for these examinations, Baring went off to Germany and later availed himself of the services of crammers in London. Twice he failed and only succeeded on his third, which would have been his final, attempt at the Service. This was in 1898, when he was twenty-four years old.

But this is to make Baring seem a grind, which he was far from being. His long days at the crammers were followed by long nights, "distracted and dislocated by many amusements," as he put it in *The Puppet Show of Memory*. These included theatrical evenings put on by Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Eleanora Duse, and Sarah Bernhardt (to whom he later became a friend). There were balls and races and, in the summer, long English country weekends, "where a constellation of beauty moved in muslin and straw hats and yellow roses on the lawns of gardens designed by Lenôtre, delicious with ripe peaches on old brick walls, with the smell of verbena, and sweet geranium." During these years, Baring seemed to live the kind of life about which Henry James wrote. Artistically, the cold-shower morality of Ibsen was alternated with the steamy drama of Wagner, both then much the fashion among young English intellectuals. Time, too, was made for foreign travel. "We bathed in the Nile and smoked hashish," he writes of a visit with a friend to his uncle in Cairo.

Maurice Baring was also developing a small but genuine reputation as a mild eccentric, English schoolboy division. He was from the beginning extravagant with money, perhaps owing to his having grown up with so much of it about the house. At Cambridge he edited a few issues of an undergraduate magazine to which he contributed topsy-turvy fairy tales he called *Immoral Stories for Children*, in which kindly children are punished, unpleasant ones rewarded, and cheaters come out winners. (Sounds, it will be argued, more like stark realism.) Lanky, shambling, with a thick brown mustache, not yet billiard-ball bald as he was later to become, the young Maurice Baring had blue eyes and a cackling laugh and easy erudition. His friend Eddie Marsh, with whom he was at Cambridge, wrote in his memoirs: "I don't think I ever saw Maurice actually reading a book—he would pick one up, peck at it like a thrush at a worm, and soon put it down again; but there must have been some process of 'inward penetration.'" Late in the pages of Baring's novel *Cat's Cradle*, a rather dim minor figure appears who, *mutatis mutandis*, seems reminiscent of the youthful Maurice Baring:

> Among the guests at Alton-Leigh there was a young man who had just come down from Oxford, called Horace Crane. He had been at Magdalen College and was a good scholar, but had not done as well as was expected. He had enjoyed life too much, and, although neither sporting nor athletic, he had had friends in both those camps, and in those camps only. He preferred them to the more serious or the more artistic. At the same time, he was a great reader. His friends suspected him of writing verse, in secret. He was untidy and short-sighted, and he had a round, good-natured face like the moon, and an infectious laugh.

Maurice Baring remained, as did so many Englishmen of his generation and after, something of a schoolboy for life. He corresponded his life long with one of his tutors in verse (in triolets, specifically). His whimsy, surely, was very much that of the schoolboy. When, for example, he was required to spell out his name for people over the telephone, he would exclaim: "B for Beastly, A for Apple, R for Rotten, I for England, N for Nothing, G for God." Eddie Marsh remembers him at a post office in Florence insisting that the stamps he purchase be "freschi" (fresh), since "they were for an invalid." (Non-sequitorial humor, to be sure, is not everyone's cup of claret.) As a university student, he partook in much throwing of food and wine; and, at Oxford, where he spent two terms after work at the crammers', he and his friends used to buy wine that they referred to as "throwing port."

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Later, working as an unpaid attaché at the British Embassy in Paris, Baring found himself engaged in what, in *Lost Lectures*, he calls "the Battle of the Inkpots," in which he and a young third secretary threw every inkpot, black and red, they could find at each other, so that, at the battle's end, "not only were the staff drenched with ink, red and black, but so was the Chancery carpet, the staircase and the walls." He and the third secretary, who later went on to become an ambassador, "were sent for [by the Chancellor], and with terse acidity he told us we were nothing better than dirty little schoolboys." Not far off, perhaps.

Although Baring would hold minor diplomatic posts in Copenhagen and Rome, he soon enough discovered that the life of the diplomat was not for him. He had written smallish things through his youthful stint in the Diplomatic Service, and a part of him longed to be able to write full-time. Years before he had been encouraged by Edmund Gosse, the English man of letters, who praised an essay on Anatole France that Baring had written for *The Yellow Book*, telling him, in Baring's words, that "there was a unique opportunity for anyone who should make it his aim and business to write gracefully and delicately about beautiful and distinguished things, and that I could not do better than try to continue as I had begun." His love for Russia, too, contributed indirectly to his decision to give up the Diplomatic Service in favor of the writing life, for in Russia, which he first visited in 1901, staying with the diplomatist Count Benckendorff, everybody seemed "to live in such simplicity and without any paraphernalia at all," and in Russia, where the pace was deliciously slow, "there seemed to be no time." So smitten by his Russian visit was Baring that, as he would later note, "I resolved firstly to learn Russian, and, secondly, to go back there as soon as I could."

It was Baring's knowledge of the Russian language, which he acquired over the next few years, that permitted him to exit manfully from the Diplomatic Service into the literary life. While still a diplomat in Rome, he used to stroll in the Pincio garden with Violet Paget, who wrote under the name of Vernon Lee and who was once the friend of Henry James, where they "spoke of the past and the future and built castles in the air, or smoked what Balzac called enchanted cigarettes, that is to say, talked of books that never would be written." But now the cigarettes need not be enchanted, for Baring had the freedom and time to write real books.

As someone who had begun reading the Russians in Russian, Baring first proposed to publishers to translate Dostoevsky and Gogol into English. But the interest was not yet there. The Russians were still considered dark barbarians, coarse and more than a little mad. (As late as 1913, Max Beerbohm was still able to mock the vogue for Russian literature by creating an all-purpose Russian writer named Kolniyatsch, of whom Beerbohm wrote: "his burning faith in a personal Devil, his frank delight in earthquakes and pestilences, and his belief that every one but himself will be brought back to life in time to be frozen in the next glacial epoch, seem rather to stamp him as an optimist.") But when Baring returned to (then still) Tsarist Russia in 1904, he found a wonderfully fluid society, with "no barriers, no rules, no obstacles." He was an early devotee of Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre, which made the reputation of Chekhov as a playwright. So natural was the acting in the Art Theatre that, on one occasion, Baring remembered, a member of the audience sitting in a box engaged one of the actors in conversation that led to an argument.

At his friend Count Benckendorff's recommendation, Baring signed on with the London *Morning Post* to cover the Russo-Japanese War. In the looser newspaper days of that era, the first piece that Baring sent the *Morning Post* was about the Moscow Art Theatre's production of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Baring wrote it on his way to Manchuria, the scene of the war, in the third-class carriage of a Russian train. Traveling third-class became part of Baring's modus operandi, for, as he remarks in *The Puppet*

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Show of Memory: "It was now, in this railway carriage, that I for the first time came into intimate contact with the Russian people, for in a third-class railway carriage the artificial barriers of life are broken down, and everyone treats everyone else as an equal." Well-born and perfectly at ease in the most luxe settings, Baring seems always to have survived quite nicely under the roughest conditions, which speaks to his impressively balanced disposition. It also speaks to his equanimity, very useful in a writer, in accepting and appreciating the world however he found it.

Baring also had a talent for discovering the best in people, which is open only to the imaginative. In Manchuria, he found good sense among the Chinese and good nature among the Cossacks. But he could also be tough when the occasion required it. Meek-looking man though he seemed, he apparently suffered not the least fear under gunfire. He took war for what it was: a nightmare, a disaster, and a triumph of spirit. "I thought war is to man," he wrote, "what motherhood is to woman—a burden, a source of untold suffering, and yet a glory." To a true writer, which Baring was, nothing is a total loss, not even death itself. Here, for example, is Baring in Manchuria the morning after a battle, surveying a corpse-strewn field in the company of a Russian officer, who points out a dead Japanese soldier to him:

> He was lying with brown eyes wide open and showing his white teeth. But there was nothing grim or ghastly in that smile. It was miraculously beautiful; it was not the smile of inscrutable content which we see on certain statues of sleeping warriors such as that of Gaston de Foix at Milan, or Guidarello Guidarelli at Ravenna, but a smile of radiant joy and surprise, as if he had suddenly met with a friend for whom he had longed, above all things, at a moment when of all others he had needed him. Near him a Russian boy was lying, fair and curly-headed, with his head resting on one arm, as if he had fallen asleep like a tired child overcome with insuperable weariness, and had opened his eyes to pray to be left at peace just a little longer.

One is right to sense a religious note in this portrait of the sleeping dead, for it was written after Maurice Baring's conversion, in 1909, to Roman Catholicism, which he later called "the only action in my life which I am quite certain I have never regretted." The religious note in Baring's writing is neither dominant nor crucial yet still significant. In *Maurice Baring: A Postscript*, Baring's friend Laura Lovat recounts his hearing, near the end of his life, that François Mauriac had told Robert Speaight that "what I most admire about Baring's work is the sense he gives you of the penetration of grace," and thrilling to think that he meant the word in its theological sense, which Mrs. Lovat assured him Mauriac did indeed.

But before Baring's conversion to Catholicism he had converted to Russophilism. As the *Morning Post*'s correspondent first in Moscow and then later in Saint Petersburg, Baring met such figures as P. A. Stolypin, who attempted to derail the Russian Revolution before it began, and Prince D. S. Mirski, the literary critic, who as Minister of the Interior in 1905 ended newspaper censorship in Russia: "the opening of a small skylight," as Baring would later report, "into a darkened room." Baring's view of the political situation in Russia during the first decade of the century was that "an incompetent government was being opposed by an ineffectual revolution."

Baring was spared having to see Lenin's Soviet Union, which, in destroying all that he loved about Russia, could not have been other than noxious to him. His was instead the Russia of Tolstoy and Goncharov, Turgenev and Chekhov—the writer's Russia of beauteous nature contending with "dirt, squalor, misery, slovenliness, disorder, and the uninspiring wooden provincial towns, the dusty or sodden roads, the frequent grey skies, the long and heavy sameness." In such books as *The Russian People*, he recognized in the Russian character a firm realism that distrusted all that was abstract and meta-

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physical and that fought endlessly against a too-great malleability and weakness of will —"the hard kernel in the soft fruit," as Baring described it. Like many an observer before him, Baring in the end was left puzzled by the mixture of opposite qualities in the Russian character, though he never doubted that "the Russian soul is filled with a human Christian charity which is warmer in kind and intenser in degree, and expressed with a greater simplicity and sincerity than is to be met with in any other people."

About Russia's literature Baring's understanding was not only prescient but nearly perfect. He understood that Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were greater writers than Turgenev. He called the former two writers "the two great columns which support the temple of Russian literature," while Turgenev's place was within the temple itself. Although he was no great devotee of the modern, he knew precisely wherein the power of Chekhov resided, which was to show the "Russian soul crying out in the desert." He knew, too, that Chekhov's importance was not only artistic but also political, even though politics was never mentioned in any of his plays. Baring sensed that Russian romanticism, as represented by such writers as Pushkin and Lermontov, had an impressive realism at its center. Of Pushkin, he wrote:

> His diction is the inseparable skin of the thought. You seem to hear him thinking. He was gifted with divine ease and unpremeditated spontaneity. His soul was sincere, noble, and open; he was frivolous, a child of the world and of his century; but if he was worldly, he was human; he was a citizen as well as a child of the world; and it is that which makes him the greatest of Russian poets.

Maurice Baring was one of those Englishmen happiest in other countries and cultures. He found amusement where it was available and seems never to have been put off by hardship. In Constantinople in 1909, he is not at all surprised that Turks mishandle rifles; after all, the Turks he has seen cannot even properly use an umbrella. He tells of the extreme politeness (*politesse de coeur*) of the Turks, one of whom, after taking and lighting a cigarette from an English officer, explains that his brother did not accept the cigarette offered him because he does not smoke, adding, "I do not either." Baring was attracted to the whimsical yet was himself far from frivolous. In *The Puppet Show of Memory*, he provides an account of a cholera epidemic in a suburb outside Constantinople, which he encountered while covering the Balkan War; it is chilling in its ghastliness and understates what must have been his own quiet heroic efforts in aiding the dying. Baring was of that generation of Englishmen possessed of the stiff upper lip; in his case this is sometimes forgotten, because that same lip would often collapse into a boyish smile.

Baring became something of a permanent transient, with headquarters in London, wandering from country to country, picking up new languages and friends. Edmund Gosse, writing in *The Sunday Times*, called Baring "A Citizen of Europe," remarking that "as no language presents any difficulty to him, he is able to pursue his own line of imaginative thought wherever he finds it." Gosse called Baring "a complete cosmopolitan," which may be another way of saying that he was a man not quite at home anywhere.

Baring never married. His taste in women tended to alternate, as his biographer Emma Letley points out, between beauties and Sapphists, the (socially) smart and the intellectually clever. Miss Letley remarks on his close friendship with Nan Herbert, the sister to his friend Auberon Herbert, going nowhere; there was once talk, too, of a relationship with a French woman in Copenhagen. But Miss Letley seems not greatly interested in such questions, or in penetrating the depths of Baring's character generally. Baring befriended women; he tended, one gathers, to have felt more genuinely comfortable around women than men, but inevitably backed off at the point where things threatened to go beyond friendship. Perhaps

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in his sensitivity about the fragility of human relationships—which is the central subject of the novels—he felt constrained to view all marriages as ultimately destined to fail.

When World War I began, Baring joined the nascent Royal Flying Corps, not as a flyer but as an administrative aide to two of the leading figures in the RFC (predecessor of the RAF). He worked as an odd-jobs man, quite heedless of his own interests and relentless in his determination and ability always to get the job done, no matter how complicated or grindingly boring. Baring worked chiefly for Lord Trenchard, who originally had doubts about him, thinking him an indolent, rich literary man. Yet after Baring's death, he wrote in *The Times* that Baring was "the most unselfish man I have ever met or am likely to meet," and quoted Marshal Foch, who had earlier said that "there never was a staff officer in any country, in any nation, in any century like Major Maurice Baring." Baring was oddly without ego, never requiring much in the way of glory or praise generally—oddly for a writer, that is.

It was after the war that Maurice Baring became a writer full time. His elder brother John, the fourth Earl of Revelstoke, had taken over the Baring Brothers Bank, setting it in good order, and had given Maurice an allowance, which freed him, for a time at least, of the need to make his own living. Although he had already published a number of books of various kinds—books of travel writing, poetry, studies of Russian literature, works of whimsy—he now began to write novels in great earnestness, having published his first one, *Passing By*, in 1921 at the age of forty-seven. He continued to turn out a great many other belletristic works and do a good deal of journalism. Wherever he went he added to his already large stock of friends. As Eddie Marsh wrote in his memoirs: "I cannot but believe that at the General Resurrection Maurice Baring . . . will be the most warmly greeted by the greatest number and variety of his fellow-creatures from every country and continent, and from every walk of life. Russian peons, German students, old women in China, all the *beaux mondes* of Europe, writers, painters, actors, and musicians from all winds, men, women, and children who have known him for a week or for a lifetime will rise up and embrace him with individual affection."

At first glimpse, one might conclude that Maurice Baring was one of those fortunate writers favored both by talent and in life. He never appears to have felt the need to thrust himself forward. Certainly he seems to have been, if it be not oxymoronic to say so, impressively self-effacing. Yet for all his tranquility, Ethel Smyth, the operatic singer who wrote a biographical portrait of her friend Maurice Baring, concluded that "he can never have had one happy affair"; and Miss Letley remarks that "there is not one unqualifiedly happy affair in his fiction, and I am reasonably certain this is also true of his life." Anthony Powell, commenting on Baring's penchant for practical jokes, suggests that "there was something a bit uneasy in Baring's psychological make-up."

Anthony Powell speculates that Maurice Baring might have died a virgin. Technical evidence—what might it be?—on either side of the question isn't available. But there is something virginal that permeates Baring's writing. I do not mean by this that there is anything prissy about it, or secretly homosexual, but instead something distanced, something less than fully engaged by life, however much its author may be amused by life or even enamored of it, and Baring was both. The other side of this rare coin is the gift of perspective, about his own talents and much else. There seems not to have been the least competitive impulse in Baring. Whether his religion conferred this sweet passivity on Baring, or whether it was his stay against what he took to be life's hopelessness, cannot be known. The most generous explanation of Baring's extraordinary character is set out by Laura Lovat. "Perhaps one explanation," she writes, "was that with the maturity of much experience, the virtuosity of genius, the culture of great scholarship and the modesty of a saint, [Maurice] maintained, until the hour of his

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death, the mind of a child who walked through life's joys and sorrows with a deep conviction that he was always holding God's hand."

Reading Baring's novels, one sees the influence of the religious approach to life on literature, and discovers both its strengths and weaknesses. The first thing that must be noted about these novels, though, is their great flow. "Prose ought to be alive with rhythm," says a character in Baring's novel *C*, "however simple or complicated it may be." And Baring's novels are alive with rhythm, usually that provided by clear, clean, short declarative sentences. On they flow, onward, it sometimes seems, and a little beyond onward. Arnold Bennett, in his *Journal*, notes for Saturday, January 2, 1926: "I finished Baring's *Cat's Cradle* at 5:45 P.M. 720 big pages. It's curious fault is that it reads as if it really had happened: a report of actual events. It has taken me 14 days to read." Paul Horgan describes Baring's style well when he says that his prose has "the tone of a cultivated and sympathetically intelligent man talking gossip rapidly and evenly, in a level voice, with never a hesitation to choose between ways to say things, but simply running on to capture a sense of life because life—any life—is so important to catch before it is gone."

The fault Bennett points out is indeed a curious but also a true one. In one sense, Maurice Baring's novels are too much like life. The largish ones—*C*, *Cat's Cradle*—resemble life in presenting, so to say, just one damn thing after another. New characters can be introduced as late as page 650; characters crucial to plots inexplicably sicken and die. Baring can be deft and inept almost on the same page. Evelyn Waugh remarked, in a letter to Lady Diana Cooper, on Baring's carelessness in lapsing into clichés, which he thought "the curse of the polyglot." But just when one gets down on him, Baring can surprise by doing something brilliant in only a few strokes, such as the woman at a dinner party in *C*—and there are lots of dinner parties in Baring novels —who was "a middle-aged, hardened diner-out, [who] did not need to be talked to; she only wished to talk, and she never noticed if anyone listened or not." In his novels, Baring could kill more quickly than a cobra, and here, in *The Lonely Lady of Dulwich*, he does the job in one lively, lilting sentence, thus: "But just as she was ready to be taken out in London, Oliver Mostyn died of a cold caught at a race-meeting, much to the regret of a number of friends, especially those who played whist with him at his club, where he managed to lose everything except his temper." His novels are often nicely studded, too, with aphorisms of a high quality, as when he remarks, in the same novel, of male jealousy that "it is not what people do that makes men jealous, but what they are." A subsidiary character in *Cat's Cradle* remarks that "there is no such thing as a 'wonderful' woman. But men think there are, and that's just as well."

"A novel must not be too life-like," says another Baring character, "or else where does the artist come in?" He comes in, in Maurice Baring's case, in the larger vision. This vision, from one who was so generally pleasant in life, turns out to be rather dark. Paul Horgan, who is an excellent commentator upon Baring's work, notes that in his novels "love's image is linked to fatality, and never seems safe, as real things seem safe. Nothing is certain, except that love is equally a gift of the gods and a curse." Whether or not this is precisely so, it is a view that compelled Baring to write what are essentially love stories with unhappy endings. As the protagonist of *C* says, speaking, it seems safe here to say, for Baring:

> The point of life is—I think—its imperfection. The point of human beings to me is that they are full of faults and weaknesses and wickedness—it is because of all that that they are human, made up of a thousand things: defects, qualities, idiosyncrasies, tricks, habits, crotchets, hobbies, little roughnesses and queer pitfalls, unexpected quaintnesses: unexpected goodness, and unexpected badness; take all that away, and what is left? Nothing that I want to see again.

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A character in *Cat's Cradle* finds "human life is *almost* intolerable, but not quite." The heroine of that novel tells a priest that "I don't feel strong enough, well-equipped enough to deal with life." To which he responds: "We none of us feel that, because we none of us are." "I'm human, Bernard," the same woman says later, "not reasonable." And neither, any serious reader of Baring's novels comes to understand, is life reasonable. Of another character in the same novel, his mother, seeing him about to make a terrible mistake, thinks: "He would have to go to the school of life like every one else. There was no escape from sorrow, misery, and pain; or, rather, man confined in those dungeons is forced to make his own rope-ladder, to climb the spiked walls, and with scarred and bleeding feet to reach 'lasting freedom.'" What constitutes "lasting freedom" in a Baring novel is not always clear. Sometimes it is easeful death; sometimes it is true faith, for those of Baring's characters who are settled in their Catholicism—and in his novels these are often minor characters—have an admirable serenity about them. Serenity, mind you, not happiness. Nor is true conversion open to all, even among those who seek it.

Much evidence exists that Baring himself died, not without pain, in serenity. Toward the end of his life he had Parkinson's disease (so much more vividly put in the French: *paralysie agitans*). When World War II began, owing to the fear of bombing, he had to leave his house in Rottingdean to stay—until death, as it turned out—with his friends the Lovats in Scotland. In her memoir, Laura Lovat speaks of his kindness to her children, to servants, to visiting servicemen, and to anyone else he encountered. He kept a bird, a blue budgerigar named Dempsey, which not infrequently perched on his quite bald head. He took immense pleasure from music, he worked at minor literary tasks, and he died eleven days before Christmas, in 1945, quietly and in his religion. His own was a happier ending than that provided by most of his novels.

Maurice Baring is today out of print, out of fashion, literarily out of luck. For those who have never read him, perhaps the best introduction is through Paul Horgan's *Maurice Baring Restored*, a book of 1970 that is itself out of print but often found on the shelves of used-book stores. Mr. Horgan's volume gives an excellent sense of both Baring's quality and his extraordinary variety. (Perhaps it is the one book of Baring's that ought to go into Count Benckendorff's cupboard.) The only criticism that I would make about this admirable book is that Mr. Horgan, writing more than twenty years ago, predicted a modest surge in Baring's reputation. "A general restoration of Maurice Baring as a contributor to the continuing stream of literature in England seems not far off," Mr. Horgan wrote. Today it seems, if anything, rather farther off than it did twenty-two years ago.

In his lifetime, Baring's reputation was greater in France than in England. So at least Desmond MacCarthy once told Harold Nicolson, who quoted him in his diary apropos of Baring: "Desmond says, 'The English do not appreciate subtlety unless it is underlined. Maurice wrote so smoothly that the English swallowed him like junket, not realising how much flavor there really was. The French do not bolt things as we do; they keep the junket in their mouths for a while, and thus appreciate the flavor.'" Baring had other English appreciators: Max Beerbohm claimed to treasure all his books, with the exception of those about Russia, which he, Beerbohm, admitted may have been his own blind spot, and paid him the honor of a charming parody in his *Christmas Garland*. Evelyn Waugh gave Baring his due, saying that "what Maurice had was a haunting love of failure and sense of the inextricable intercalation of human lives which is impressive." In the United States, Edmund Wilson allowed that "Baring was a fine connoisseur of writing and an excellent guide to style."

And yet, for all that, reading and thinking about Maurice Baring, one cannot but conclude that everything about him seems, in

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the contemporary literary situation, quite impossible. To be sure, Baring had difficulties in his own day. He felt reviewers never grasped his point: "He is praising me for what isn't there," he told Laura Lovat about a misguided review, "I must explain." It wasn't always easy for him to get publishers for his books, though the firm of William Heinemann Ltd. did bring out a collected edition of his work in the 1930s. But the notion of a man of letters such as Baring setting out, as Edmund Gosse advised, to write "gracefully and delicately about beautiful and distinguished things," would seem laughable in our day if it were not so sad. (Imagine such a formulation of one's aim on the application for a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1992.) If Baring were alive today, publishers would have nothing to do with him; he would find no place in any university; it is doubtful that he could command the attention of even a few hundred readers.

In his essay "High-Brows and Low-Brows," Baring wrote: "I mean by the good high-brow the man who is well educated and glad of the fact without thrusting it down other people's throats, who, without being ashamed of his knowledge, his intellectual or artistic superiority, or his gifts and aptitudes, does not use them as a rod to beat others with, and does not think that because he is the fortunate possessor of certain rare gifts or talents, he is therefore a better or a more useful man: such is the good high-brow." Baring continued: "My point is that the more of these there are the better for the nation, the better for all of us. When there shall be no more of them, it will mean the end of our civilisation."

In this essay, Baring obviously could not have known that he was speaking not only precisely to the posthumous condition of his own writing, but, in a wider view, even more poignantly to the artistic and intellectual life of our own day. To put it in the cant language of environmentalism, when we talk about good high-brows of the kind Baring had in mind, we are no longer talking about an endangered but about an all-but-extinct species.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $6 each. A list of highlights is available on request from the Office Manager.

We are also pleased to announce the publication of an Index to the first ten years of *The New Criterion*, September 1982-June 1992. The Index is available for $12.50 a copy.

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A footnote to Yalta

by Jeremy Murray-Brown

In the National Archives in Washington, D.C., there exists a short clip of film which would appear to be the only one of its kind ever made. It is the unedited footage taken by an American Army camera unit at a prisoner-of-war camp in southern Germany in February 1946. A card, headed "Return of Russian Prisoners to Russia," identifies the subject matter of the film and the location where it was taken.

For many years this unique piece of film was not available for public inspection. What it recorded was a small part of a vast operation that was one of the most sensitive of the Second World War, the handing over to Stalin of large numbers of Russians who in varying circumstances found themselves under German control by the war's end. Some of these Russians had been organized into military units to fight alongside German forces against the Red Army; in addition to them were well-known Cossack regiments who had left their homeland in the period 1917-1921 after the defeat of the White Russian armies by the Bolsheviks. In all, several hundred thousand Russians—a staggering number—took up arms against the Soviet Union in the years following the German invasion in June 1941.

The fate of these Russians was one of the best kept secrets of the war. As many as could surrendered to American and British forces, trusting that they would eventually be able to settle somewhere outside the Soviet Union. But in February 1945, at the Yalta conference, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to Stalin's demand that they be handed over to him. The anti-Soviet Russians in the hands of the Western allies would therefore be betrayed. To carry out the repatriation order, American and British servicemen often had to resort to deception and brute force. No one doubted what was in store for the Russians once they were in Soviet hands. Many were executed on the spot. In some instances, Allied guards responsible for turning over their prisoners could see their bodies hanging in the forests where the exchange took place. Some were transferred on the same boat that had brought the British delegation to Yalta a few months previously. They were shot behind warehouses on the quay side with low-flying Soviet planes circling overhead to help drown the noise of the rifle fire. Many returned prisoners were tortured before being shot. The remainder disappeared into prison camps for long sentences, receiving the worst treatment of all the Gulag's inmates. Needless to say, all were immediately stripped of the new winter clothing and personal equipment that had been generously issued to them by the British in response to the cynical demands of Soviet liaison officers. American and British officers were the appalled eyewitnesses to many desperate acts of suicide by Russian men and women who preferred their own death and that of their wives and children to falling into the hands of the Cheka/NKVD/GPU/KGB. The

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Cossack General Pyotr Krasnov, who had fought against the Bolsheviks back in 1918, hoped that the British would sympathize with his situation, remembering their own intervention at that time on the side of the White Russians. Churchill, British Secretary for War in 1919, had then been the most ardent supporter of their cause; while the Allied Commander-in-Chief in Italy, Field Marshal Alexander, still wore a Russian Imperial order awarded to him for his services against the Bolsheviks in Courland. Krasnov in turn had then been decorated with the British Military Cross. He, like other White Russians, had never been a Soviet citizen. But his appeals were unavailing. Under the Yalta agreement, he too was sent back to the Soviet Union to certain death. He was for Stalin a prize captive. Another bonus came Stalin's way when zealous administrators for good measure threw in individuals and groups from the Baltic republics and Yugoslavia who found themselves on the wrong side when hostilities ended and whose repatriation had never been part of the Yalta negotiations.

Of all this, the public in the democracies knew nothing. For three decades the subject remained a closely guarded secret. Western eyewitnesses were obliged by official policy to keep silent. A few journalists knew that some handing over was taking place, but not its scale. But Alexander Solzhenitsyn had met some of the surviving Russians in Soviet prison camps and learned about their history. His account of their fate and that of their leader, General Vlasov, which appeared in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1973—itself a sensation—was the first the general public in the West heard of the subject and the phenomenon, as Solzhenitsyn put it, of so many young Russians joining in a war against their own Fatherland. "Perhaps there is something to ponder here," he wrote. When Western archives were at last available to historians, two remarkable books quickly appeared: *The Last Secret* (1974), by Nicholas Bethel, and *Victims of Yalta* (1977), by Nikolai Tolstoy, both shocking in their detailed accounts of what had happened. The BBC joined in with a television documentary by a Hungarian filmmaker, Robert Vas, based on interviews with many servicemen and civilians who had been involved in the tragedy or knew about it. Some of them confessed to still feeling traumatized by what they had been ordered to do. Solzhenitsyn had written harshly about the moral weakness of Western leaders in kowtowing to Stalin, about the duplicity and short-sightedness of their repatriation policy; and though others defended the decisions taken as a necessity of war, pointed questions continued to be raised over the reputation of prominent individuals who had a hand in determining the policy. In 1989, a bitter libel action was fought in British courts between a senior establishment figure and his detractors who accused him of being one of the military officers responsible for repatriating Cossack and Yugoslav prisoners knowing what their fate would be. Tolstoy, the author of *Victims of Yalta*, was one of his accusers, arguing that senior British officers were in this matter just as guilty as German officers executed for war crimes.

The film in the National Archives is thus a unique visual document, an extraordinary witness to a dark episode in this century's history. To historians of documentary films it offers an absorbing text on the elusive correspondence between visual records and historical reality, between pictorial and literary descriptions of events, a subject that requires increasing attention in our image-conscious age. For me the discovery of this film clip came at the same time as I learned with a shock that none of the students I was lecturing to, and who were about to graduate from a leading mass-communications institute, was aware of "the Gulag," or indeed had heard of the term. How can one explain the significance of visual records if there is no historical imagination to give them meaning?

Unedited footage constitutes the raw material of documentary film. It contains everything the cameraman shot, usable or

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not, and in the order in which he shot it. Thus it is a visual document in its primary state, providing the historian with evidence not only of the subject matter displayed in front of the camera lens but also of the attitudes and intentions of the cameraman. In the National Archives, as in most newsreel archives, cards identify the source and content of each item and provide a brief list of the scenes in it. The card in this case is no exception. It classifies it as Signal Corps material. In addition to its file number and title, it gives the sequence of shots in a professional, noncommittal manner, and ends: "Note: Most of the prisoners are former Russian soldiers captured by the Germans near Stalingrad. After, many of them joined the German Army and fought against the Russians." The film itself lasts for about seven minutes and would seem to be all that the cameraman recorded during the time in which what is shown in the film took place. If the material had ever been cut together to make a story, it would have run for barely half that time. What we see is this:

Lines of men wrapped in heavy coats are moving across a muddy square in front of a row of single-story huts. In the background, buildings reveal the outskirts of a small town, with what might be a church steeple and a factory chimney providing the chief landmarks. Some of the men are carrying their packs, others are still loading them with their belongings. It's cold; men stamp their feet and rub their hands together. A quantity of discarded or unclaimed personal items are scattered about on the ground. American military police stand by, armed and carrying white nightsticks, with which they briskly encourage the men to move along. On the hood of a jeep parked in the vicinity a loudspeaker is set up, and a Russian officer with a handset can be presumed to be calling out names. (He's identified as such on the card—the film is silent.) Individuals come forward to have their names checked by a young American officer who is without a hat. The Russian prisoners make their way to a column of trucks. They check their names with another American officer against another list. The hull of an American tank can be seen behind them, a white star displayed prominently on its gun-turret. There are piles of kitbags, cases, personal belongings. The prisoners mount the trucks. A wintry sun casts pale shadows. The trucks move down a mud-filled road with American guards sitting at the rear and pull into the railyard. The prisoners are searched again as they climb into freight cars in the railyard. Others wait their turn behind barbed wire, and the shadow of a truck passes across them. The guards are chewing gum. An ancient steam engine slowly pulls the freight cars away from the scene.

From the conventional filmmaker's point of view, the film is rather dull. It looks like routine coverage of routine military life. But the Archives' card identifies the scene as taking place in February 1946 at "Platting" —a spelling or typing mistake for Plattling. And what happened on February 24, 1946, at Plattling is described by both Bethel and Tolstoy. Some fifteen hundred Russians from a unit commanded by a General Meandrov were due to be repatriated that day. As Tolstoy tells it, in the early hours American troops, equipped with riot clubs and rubber-soled shoes, crept into the sleeping Russians' dormitory huts.

> Abruptly the stillness of the camp was broken by the shrieking blast of a whistle. Startled, Meandrov's men woke and looked about them. At once a ghastly cacophony of yells burst from all around. Without any warning, and with accompanying shrieks and curses, the Americans began to lash with the bludgeons at each recumbent figure. "*Mak snell! Mak snell!*" they shouted in pidgin German, driving the bewildered figures out of their beds, through the doorways and across to the camp gates. Anyone slow in scrambling from his bed was beaten ferociously until he too fled in his underclothes out into the night. At the gates stood a row of trucks, their engines humming, into which the prisoners were driven by their screaming guards. Off along darkened roads the speeding convoy clattered and swayed. There followed a hasty transfer to

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a train, and the journey was continued some hours later. The train rattled on towards the east, where already a pale cold light was failing in the darkening sky. Near the Czech frontier, beyond Zwiesel, the train halted in the dripping stillness of the Bavarian forest. Blue-capped troops were waiting; officers exchanged brief words through an interpreter, and the bruised and terrified men of Meandrov's Division were shepherded down beside the railway track. Dazed, they stood in little groups amongst the puddles. The American guards, silent and awkward, jumped back into their carriages and prepared to make off. There was a brief hissing and clanking of pistons, and then the blank gaze of the Vlasov men watched swaying lights disappear back along the line.

The Americans returned to Plattling visibly shamefaced. Before their departure from the rendezvous in the forest, many had seen rows of bodies already hanging from the branches of nearby trees. On their return, even the SS men in a neighbouring compound lined the wire fence and railed at them for their behaviour. The Americans were too ashamed to reply.

The contrast between the scene portrayed in the film clip and the one described by Tolstoy is startling. One might well wonder if Tolstoy's incident took place on the same day as the filming. Apart from the personal items strewn on the ground in the film, there is nothing to suggest the violence, the noise, and the terror, or the speed with which, in Tolstoy's account, the operation was conducted. That the pictures were taken on the same day as the operation, however, is confirmed by one shot in the film, not yet mentioned. It appears toward the end of the roll, at a point where the cameraman was in the railyard filming the prisoners, who, having been brought to the train in trucks, are being searched before boarding the freight cars. The shot is rather puzzling: a man is brought up to the camera by American soldiers, accompanied by one or two officers. He opens his coat cheerfully to reveal a bare chest with what seem to be lines or scars drawn on it. The man and his guards appear to be smiling at each other. They are all glad to pose for the camera. This shot is described in the Archives' card as: "Russian soldier who slashed himself on chest with hope that he would not be returned to Russian [*sic*], poses with guards."

As it happened, an Army stills photographer was also present at Plattling that day —perhaps the same man as took the film. A few days later, on March 6, a photograph was published in the American Forces newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, showing this same Russian. It's an identical pose to a frame in the film. The caption to the photograph reads:

> HURT: Russian repatriate Constantine Gustonon grimaces with pain after he slashed himself on the chest some 17 times in a suicide attempt to avoid being returned to Russia. He is held by Capt. Kenny Gardner, of the 66th Inf. Regt. Gustonon's was the first case of attempted suicide among the deportees from Platting [*sic*] to Russia as PWs.

The photograph is reproduced in Bethel's book and is described as "rare." It is rare indeed, carried in only one edition of *Stars and Stripes* and with no accompanying story, but it's enough to corroborate that the film clip was taken on the same occasion.

As evidence, then, for what actually took place at Plattling on February 24, 1946, the visual document is clearly of dubious value. To tell the story of the repatriation of the Russians, Bethel and Tolstoy needed written documents and eyewitnesses, just as Solzhenitsyn drew on what he heard from survivors he met in Soviet camps and his own documentary research. These written and oral sources have provided the primary evidence of what happened as a result of the secret Yalta accords. No doubt Tolstoy was highlighting the extraordinary nature of the operation in the extract given above; Bethel quoted "a Russian witness" who said that "Many of us had to stand in six degrees of frost from 6 a.m. until four o'clock that evening," which implies that the clearing of the camp went on for most of the day.

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Even so, the disparity between the pictorial and the verbal depictions of this event is striking. At this level of historical reality, the level that concerns primary evidence for what actually happened, the visual record preserved in seven minutes of Signal Corps film is ambiguous, to say the least.

At another level of reality, however, the very existence of the film must claim attention. What is its meaning? We can't exactly disbelieve what we see in its frames, but can we rely on what we see? It depends, of course, on what we bring to our viewing of it, what an art historian has called the beholder's share. Here the cameraman's laconic written report is an important aid to interpretation, though not in the sense that he may have intended. His words like his pictures give no hint of the drama that had taken place earlier that day or of the fate that lay ahead for these men at the end of the train journey they are shown taking. In this respect, the card's reference to the "Russian soldier who slashed himself on chest with hope that he would not be returned to Russia" is also ambiguous. If we did not know of the many other actual and attempted suicides that accompanied the policy of forcible repatriation, we might understand from this scene that the Russian was a malingerer, a type known to sergeant majors in armies all over the world. Five men did in fact succeed in killing themselves in the railroad freight cars on their journey from Plattling. There's no way we can tell from the card or the film of the plight of these Russians captured near Stalingrad—if this was where they were taken prisoner. The card is deadpan in informing us that many of them joined the German Army to fight against the Russians, but it provides no indication of why they did so.

At this second level of reality, then, the Signal Corps film illustrates that visual records are rarely as transparent as they seem; they are not windows giving access to reality but mirrors reflecting the mental landscape of the persons who made them. What they document is an intention, a moral reality that lies behind the camera, rather than a physical reality that happens to be in front of it. Looking again more closely at the film, one picks up clues to this other reality. Take Captain Kenny Gardner, the officer who holds poor Constantine Gustonon's arm as he bares his chest to show us his self-inflicted wounds. Captain Gardner wears dark glasses on the cold, February day. He carries an officer's forage cap on his head. His down topcoat is warmly buttoned, the hood pulled back, which in its turn pulls back part of the front collar.

The inside of the captain's collar is of a lighter texture than the rest and this makes it possible to identify him in other shots even if we don't see his face clearly in close-up. We now realize that he has played an indeterminate but official role in the filmmaking. In one scene, as the trucks carrying prisoners move down the muddy road toward the railyard, a jeep drives up on the edge of the frame and an officer gets out of the passenger seat just as the cameraman stops the camera. But there's enough on the film to recognize Captain Gardner's collar, although we don't yet know this as we haven't seen the shot of Gardner holding Gustonon's arm. Gardner has stopped his jeep to talk to the cameraman. To tell him he has a good story? That he has a Russian prisoner who slashed his chest and wouldn't that make a good picture? We can't tell, of course, but very soon after this appears the shot of Gardner with Gustonon. He's the one who holds Gustonon's arm to show that he's in charge (there's another officer in this picture, but he stands behind Gustonon and he's not named). After patching up his chest, they're putting him on the train anyway, and Gardner makes sure that he, Gardner, is the one closest to the camera.

And Captain Gardner appears a last time before the train pulls out with the Russians. The cameraman has already shown us a scene of Russians being searched at the entrance to the freight cars. He then gives us a shot (a "cutaway") of another group waiting with their bags behind a wire fence, the one with the shadow of a truck passing across it. The next scene logically for the

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cameraman to shoot would be the train pulling out of the siding. But no, we go back for another two shots of Russians being searched prior to entering the freight cars. And who is doing the searching this time? Captain Kenny Gardner. He certainly wanted to be in the picture, and, as far as *Stars and Stripes* was concerned, he succeeded.

There's another shot that gives one cause for reflection. It occurs in the first portion of the film in which we are shown columns of men moving across the muddy expanse in front of their barracks. The activity seems confusing at first. One line is moving in one direction, another in the opposite direction, and a large group in the middle are not moving at all. Near them are what appear to be two trestle tables, their centers covered with white clothes. Could these possibly be makeshift altars, erected for a final service for men who expect the worst to happen to them before the end of this day? And could the figures standing motionless at these tables be praying? Perhaps this is overdramatizing the scene. If they are altars in the shot, no doubt they have been erected for a regular church parade. But that would mean this day was Sunday and surely the Americans would not have planned their drastic operation for a Sunday? It seems it was so, however, for February 24, 1946, was indeed a Sunday.

Thus the images in the Plattling film offer us their own kind of evidence after all, while the film's existence in the Signal Corps archives itself raises interesting questions about the use of the film medium by the American Army in war. Why was this particular episode filmed? And filmed like this? Who authorized the filming? On whose orders? If the order to return all Russian prisoners to the Soviet Union—forcibly if need be—was so secret, why have a camera there that day? Tolstoy, who was denied sight of the film, speculated that it was intended as a guide for future operations. But the sequences hardly support this. It might of course have been a mistake; a snarl-up in duties by Signal Corps operatives. But if this were so, why was the *Stars and Stripes* photographer also present?

The more we think about these seven minutes of official film the more disturbing the questions become. Five weeks earlier, Russians interned at Dachau, site of the notorious Nazi concentration camp and not far from Plattling, had resisted their repatriation with a ferocity that stunned American military police, resulting in at least ten suicides. Did someone have the idea of using a film clip to quell rumors about the difficulties the American Army encountered in the forcible repatriation program? Did they think they might show the clip in other camps whose inmates were also scheduled for deportation? The film material strongly suggests that it was intended to give the impression that the repatriation policy was being conducted without incident. Further research would no doubt teach us more about the use of visual images for propaganda purposes by all the participants in World War II, use that on one reading of this film could be compared with the Nazi film *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*, made at the bogus Theresienstadt concentration camp to fool the Red Cross and neutrals. In the Nazi film, Jews are seen living in reasonable, if cramped, conditions, enjoying their own cultural activities and limited opportunities for work. They smile in some shots, tend their own gardens, watch their own games of soccer, and they even have the luxury of hot-water showers (to quell rumors that signs to the showers led to gas chambers?). All who participated, including the cameraman, were sent on to Auschwitz. For the Signal Corps cameraman at Plattling, the assignment, it appears, was undemanding. He has distanced himself from his subjects and displays little sympathy for them.

There remains a third level of interest in this film, however: its value as an aesthetic object, not something we would normally associate with an officially sponsored film. Yet this is often what gives newsreel material its permanent appeal, especially black-and-white footage. It testifies not to historical facts but to the fact of history. It reminds us of our own mortality.

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Aesthetic considerations were certainly far from the minds of those who ordered the film to be taken and the results in this case do not show any special filmic quality. But once we know more about the context in which the filming took place, and once it dawns on us what the material really signifies, the images are transformed and the whole piece acquires an emotional charge unrelated to formal aspects of the recording medium. They have the power to move us in the same way that graffiti in Christian catacombs do. Yes, that probably was a church service the camera caught a glimpse of as it came to an end. We can imagine the heart-wrenching melodies of the Russian Orthodox liturgy in that desolate setting. Was it by chance or design that the camera caught the shadow of a truck passing across the wire behind which prisoners wait their turn to board the railcars? Details that are included in documentaries as "filler" material or "cutaways" ("B-Roll" in modern video terms), always with a deadening effect, now come to life. They affect us through their artlessness, their truth to life. The packs and belongings abandoned on the ground bear witness to an earlier scene not recorded on camera, the one, no doubt, described by Tolstoy. We suddenly become alert to the mud, the cold, the awful process of selection by those with power over those without it. One man slowly limps across the frame, as if dragging out his remaining hours on earth; another comes trotting up when his name is called, and then trots on into the truck that is going to take him back to Stalin, a response that suggests a man who has survived many other camps. Will he also survive this journey? The young American without a hat present at the first roll call does not seem part of the military. But he appears to speak Russian. He catches a prisoner who is trying to slip quickly by when his turn comes, holding him by his coat as he checks on his list. Then he puts away the paper that he's been holding in his hand. What, one wonders, was his role in the events of that day? And what became of him?

We can't exactly blame Stalin for wanting to get his hands on these men. The Cossacks were implacable enemies of the Soviet state, and most of the others who had joined Russian divisions under German control had no reason to feel loyalty toward the Stalinist system. Nor can we blame ordinary Russians who had suffered terribly defending their country if they felt outraged at fellow countrymen who donned German uniforms. In the Soviet Union, wrote Solzhenitsyn, to call someone a Vlasovite, a follower of General Vlasov, was a term of abuse comparable with calling him "sewage." In Britain, the word "Quisling," the name of the Norwegian Nazi, had a similar connotation for traitors of all kinds. And whatever we may think of their leaders in acquiescing in the policy of repatriation, surely most American and British soldiers who had seen German concentration camps must have felt that any Russian who allied himself with the Nazis deserved all that was coming to him.

Nearly half a century has passed since these events took place. In those extraordinary months before they lost control of the center of power, Soviet officials were themselves driven to admit to the crimes of the Stalin era, internal and external, including the Nazi-Soviet pact and the atrocity of Katyn committed against the Poles during the existence of the pact. Since then we have seen a Romanov brought back to what is now again called Saint Petersburg to be buried with a traditional Orthodox mass in a Cathedral that until recently had been treated as a museum, and we have heard questions openly raised about the future of Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. The Soviet Union is no more, the names have all changed, and the archives have been opened. In this topsy-turvy Russian world, it would not be surprising if the fate of the Cossacks and even the Vlasovites came to be seen in a new light, just as terrorists in the old colonial regimes were reborn as freedom fighters when independence came to their countries. It was, after all, these anti-Soviet Russians who saved Prague from destruction by SS units in the last days of the war. Who

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knows what else lies hidden in the Soviet archives? Some Russians who did survive the repatriation policy lie buried in a graveyard in the Hudson Valley, not far out of New York City, where prayers are said regularly for their souls and for their country. Memorials proudly display their battle honors—1917-1921; 1941-1945. Is it beyond belief that a similar memorial will one day be erected inside Russia?

Meanwhile, the seven minutes of unedited Signal Corps film rests in the archives in Washington, a reminder that a shadow still lies over actions committed by the victors in this war. Now that Russians are facing up to their own past, some gesture of reconciliation from the West on behalf of these forgotten men would not be inappropriate. The gray human figures that have been captured on celluloid are like the shards of an archeological dig, to be handled with the utmost tenderness as we reconstruct their world, relive their experiences. With the exception of Constantine Gustonon, the man who stabbed himself in the chest, we know no one's name; but here are individual human beings whose images have been saved from the turmoil of a terrible century. A few lined and weary faces are recognizable, they speak for all of humanity, and who cannot single out among them a son, a brother, a husband?

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From the Tiger's claw

by Kathleen McCann

. . . Here Andrea dal Castagno learned the art and taught it to other masters, among whom it was amplified and went on gaining in importance until the time of Pietro Perugino, of Leonardo da Vinci, and of Raffiello da Urbino, so much so that it has now attained to that beauty which thanks to these masters our artists have achieved.
—Vasari

You must worship vulgarity. You must shun form. You must never draw. You must reject harmonious color. You must paint crudely, preferably in a demonic frenzy. You must offend all people all the time. You must hail Tragedy everywhere, in everyone, always. You must vanquish Beauty. You must theorize about art. Your work must be socially significant. These are only ten of the newly clichéd ideas evident in much, though by no means all, painting, art criticism, and curatorship of recent decades, allegedly reflecting the world we live in. Inspired elements in them may once have served, still serve, a worthy purpose: they are postulated against equally rigid antitheses. They touch on changing concepts with a long past—ideas of the rude, crude, and awesome—which art perennially engages. But much of the current revolutionary thinking on art appears to be in deep freeze. William Blake predicted this in his poems about Orc, the archetype of the despotic mind. As the Frye and Erdman-Bloom readings would seem to suggest, and the poems themselves show, Orc, who began his career as a rebel, became politically correct (though never in his attitude toward women) in the way his thinking ossified into the very mind-forged manacles he rebelled against in the first place. Aesthetically correct hegemonies spin on the same axis. Last year's Salon des Réfusés becomes this year's institute of correct art. "Mr. Turner's little jokes" was how members of the Royal Academy dismissed several of Turner's late works, and abstract artists dismissed figurative work with equal alacrity. Today, various schools of kitsch appear to be the rule, not the exception. And so the wheel of ready-made opinion turns. More than seventy-five years after the Armory Show, curators in major museums are still reliving what were essentially the battles of modernism, clueless about the real postmodern world and freedoms at stake today. But Blake had a better idea. He showed critical thinking with a moral dimension (not hypocrisy) reveals a universe beyond the Orc cycle. Blake called this Imagination, the frontier within, and it didn't have to look like his watercolors. In those "distant deeps and skies,"[1] artists aren't hemmed in by clichés.

Vulgarity, like most clichéd notions, once had a life. It's no news the Latin Bible was written in Vulgate to make it accessible to ordinary people, and the West has had a long

1 "The Tiger," in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David Erdman, with commentary by Harold Bloom (Doubleday, 1970).

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and enduring relationship with "vulgarity," from the Latin for "common people," denoting "popular," with connotations of a lack of culture, refinement, taste. Such scholars as Jessie Weston, Ernst Curtius, and C. L. Barber have shown that common language and folklore are entwined with our earliest myths and iconography, from seasonal rites to Dante Alighieri's use of Italian and the story of Lear. Examples abound. Whether folk mimics high culture, or whether high culture is the purest form of folk today, is arguable, probably both. Ever since Bion and Moschus, people of low estate have tackled high themes, just as higher-ups have liked to disguise themselves as shepherds. "Uncouth unkiste" was how Spenser recalled Chaucer in his 1579 letter to Harvey discoursing on the merits of "the olde famous Poete's" "rustical rudeness" and use of "natural English wordes" "most used of country folke," as opposed to courtly embellishments, "that by the baseness of such parts, more excellency may accrue to the principall." Spenser was describing Romantic art (not the historical accident). He called his own "ditties" "rude," and Othello's intimation that "Rude am I in my speech" touched, with rhetorical modesty, on the natural clout of his words. But uncouth as the Elizabethans themselves were, as designing for that matter, in the innocence of Christopher Marlowe's song, the lowe is high. Even Milton wrote "with forc'd fingers rude" upon the drowning of his friend Edward King in the Irish Sea. But no one would deny "Lycidas" epitomizes high culture except Dr. Johnson, since all art can be said to be "rude" in face of the inexpressible enormities of life and death, though Milton never wrote a vulgar line in any sense. It's almost a commonplace the Elizabethans liked nothing better than to mix folkloristic and courtly, high and low, in the same plays if not the same scenes, and *Lear* is so highly rude as to be awesome. Theirs was a ruddy "rudeness," if we take their word for it, having to do with native speech, immediacy of voice, reaching people, and ideas beyond reach, quite unlike the distancing vulgarity on which many artists pride themselves today.

In cinquecento painting, the style is high as the concept, without apology; yet, scholars have shown, folk imagery is everywhere together with religion. The highly "rude" way Titian painted with what visitors to his studio described as broom-sized brushes, even completing his paintings with his fingers, may account for some of the ruddiness of his work. In Haarlem, and in all of Europe, the precision of Hals's brush was uncommon, if his subjects were often uncouth. Goya's work is shadowed round with proverbial wisdom, witchcraft, and Bulls. Picasso often mixed stylistic registers, a quick, fine line, together with a lowly painted form, but not in his very best work, which is more classical. Van Gogh's often staccato brush (versus the more fanciful curvilinear), bristling impasto, and primary colors, sunny blues and yellows, are folk in style. But in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg warns that native folk, the truly "rude," in particular as it affects high culture, is being displaced by mass-produced kitsch, which he describes as imitating the effects, not the processes, of art. Pop (though design oriented) and East Village art in the Eighties were "more kitschy than thou" almost by definition. Jeff Koons's soft-porn photos at the last Venice Biennial were even more cynical.[2] Never has the vulgar been so knowingly low.

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2 This is not to say all work coming out of the East Village in the Eighties was kitschy—Ford Krull has a love of color akin to Bonnard's, whatever else he's doing, Joan Nelson, a delicate touch. Koons's transactions are a case study in the bad kind of entrepreneurship. Quoting documents for the prosecution, *Chicago Artists' News* (June 1991) reported how Koons plagiarized a photo postcard of a couple with eight puppies for his "Banality" show: "Koons tore Roger's copyright notice off the card and sent the photo to an Italian workshop with detailed instructions to make as exact a copy as possible in polychrome wood," then exhibited the result under his name. The good news is, and no one seemed to notice, kitschy as the piece is, one of the Italians

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Our peculiarly American aversion for the highfalutin, often confused with high culture, leaves many of us all but defenseless against kitsch. We learned that sensibility didn't solve the problem of Evil, and may forget it helps us address it. Many baby-boomers have only to think of the Nazis at Bayreuth to turn up the amplifier; others remember Isaac Stern's playing during the Scud missile attacks on Tel Aviv. In some circles, the notion of taste is an embarrassment having to do with intellectual cuisine, the merely decorative, sofa paintings and airport art, which, actually, have little to do with any known taste.[3] The prevailing view in galleries appears to be that tastelessness is superior. The salt of wit, sweets of love, sour of injustice, bitter of pain, are no longer aesthetically correct, not all four anyway. Text-traducers are esteemed for looking at art through theoretical frames, from diverse socio-economic, race, gender, and other vantage points, provided these do not include sense. Which is not to deny context enriches our appreciation. But it is curious that for all our advanced critical methodologies, and fear of trivializing anything, art has grown increasingly kitschy.

Cultural artifacts mirrored trendy criticism in the early Eighties when frames began to displace paintings. At Sonnabend, Robert Morris showed fire paintings dominated by weighty black frames with skulls and bones that looked like sets for *The Theory of Semiotics*. In a show on Chicago's Superior Street last year, paintings had altogether disappeared and the viewer was presented with nothing but frames made of back issues of *The New Criterion*—evidently in mint condition.

Vulgarity doesn't mean what it once meant. The new vulgarity is the collapse of critical thinking. Assaults on meaning itself, together with vainglorious ideologies, are the "high" end of what has been appearing in galleries from West Broadway to Superior Street, with many critics, curators, and artists in between not knowing what hit them. If Saint-Exupéry's hat were not a boa constrictor swallowing an elephant, it would be Jacques Derrida swallowing poor Van Gogh. In an era when philosophers fail to distinguish criticism, even the very best, from the immediate arts, it's no surprise artists, working with unmediated experience, and risking even more foolishness at every turn, get lost. Perhaps the best observation on the resulting kitsch, exemplified by Andres Serrano's no longer newsworthy photo of the Cross in a jar of urine, was made by Alexander Pope in 1712. As Maynard Mack long ago pointed out in his famous reading of the "Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux" on Belinda's dressing table in Pope's infelicitiously titled poem "The Rape of the Lock," the puffs are elevated, the Bible reduced, when persons don't know the difference. "Crisp and Clean" at the Hyde Park Art Center last year, to cite only one of many examples of the same leveling phenomenon, had much in common with the essentials of Belinda's toilette—a photo of Freud here, an allusion to Beethoven there—in a clutch for "significance." But the past mocks, or altogether eludes, cavalier attempts to collage it. And only the very greatest thieves can begin to appropriate it. Even a poet of Eliot's stature could barely contain it—the best line in *The Wasteland* is Spenser's.

In its new, debased sense, vulgarity no longer applies to Tolstoy's great Bear of a man, Pierre, whose sensitivity was equal to his natural rudeness. It no longer fits the Brontë sisters, who were too tiny to look like Bears and lived mostly on potatoes, but were

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could not help but giving a little more form to the man's face, making it younger, and the eyes, the mouth, have a touch, just a touch of, maybe a yearning for, the Florentine. This was evidently not in the order and shows art will always subvert Philistinism. But, why is the Italian working for Koons?

3 In his collection of essays *Convergences*, Octavio Paz describes art "with nothing intimate or subjective about it" as "suitable for decorating airports and other great spaces." One of Gracie Mansion's first shows in the East Village was ironically titled "Sofa Paintings."

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quite uncouth. And the new vulgarity fails utterly to describe poets of any kind. The politicization of the arts issuing in the wake of sophistical aesthetics only worsened the problem. But when Colin Clout showed up at court in his shepherd's weeds, the question on Eliza's mind was not demographic, but, can he foot it? Hence, Elizabethan poetry. Some go for the line and do the foot later. Some go for the whole composition at once. And some go for the pudding.

"The sense of ooze" is what *Art in America* found noteworthy in one artist's work, equating urethane-foam pourings with "pure painting." The formlessness of much work today finds its perfect correlative in these words, which fail to make the most fundamental distinction of all—is this true? But in the days before ooze art, even crude work, like vulgarity, had a spine. "Crude," from the Latin *crudus*, means "in the natural state," "raw," and "unripe." ("Cruel" is from the same root and Milton was playing on the etymology in "these berries harsh and crude.") To the Greeks, Nature was a little crude. Art revealed what Kenneth Clark called "our instinctive desire not to imitate but to perfect," completing Nature's unfinished work. It was the difference, Clark points out, between the naked and the nude, an idea of form, an abstraction incomprehensible to Gothic artists. The Renaissance reopened the debate: Titian called his art "more powerful than Nature"; Shakespeare played with the paradox of "Nature's Art"; and Romanticism, with all its tributaries, brought inner and outer Nature, shadowed with "rude thickets and craggy cliffs," the "disorderly order" Spenser wrote about to Harvey, down river. From Giotto's perfect "O" to Motherwell's lumbering *Spanish Elegy*, which Greenberg observed has a "crude power," the desire to complete the work Nature left unfinished gradually changed to an interest in keeping disordered forms from rolling off the canvas. Today, artists tend to see man as little more ever than a poor, forked thing, and the new crudités have less form than Nature.

Nonetheless, not ooze, but form, some form, defines art, as the appreciation of forms defines *art* criticism worthy of the name. From antiquity to modern times, artists have explored how form mimes, interprets, elaborates, condenses, or shapes ideas, feelings, and things. Form may spring like Athene from the head of Zeus, emerge from process, or be found. And form is itself informed by some shaping principle, Promethean gift of fire, sunbeams on Nile mud, or "inner conception," according to Vasari. No matter what ooze critics say, even the crudest form in painting involves *disegno*, *colorito*, and, what Vasari forgot to mention, or thought went without saying, *sfumato*, *sfumatezza*, or delicate shading. Like metaphor, *disegno*, in Vasari's words, is "cognizant of the proportion of the whole to the parts, and of the parts to each other and to the whole." But unlike the more or less mechanical collaging of planes and surfaces that characterizes design today, Vasari saw it as organically whole, and related to the drawing of natural forms.

Vasari cites the ancient proverb, "ex ungue leonem," "from the Lion's claw," to show how the sense of design enables us, upon seeing only the claw of a Lion carved in a block of stone, to imagine its size, and the whole animal, just as if it were standing there. Vasari was describing how the Classic imagination works; Blake's Tiger "burning bright" reveals the Romantic. As it stalks through the "forest of the night," its black stripes blend into the darkness, and the orange ones appear to flicker, transfigured into hell-fire. The Tiger's stripes are more informed than the Lion's mane, its "fearful symmetry," internal. In the poem, what emerges from the Tiger's claw is not only the whole animal, but, if and when the Tiger lies down with the Lamb, the whole Human Being. But not all Tigers are heaven-bent, or hell-bent and wanting heaven.

The rounded outlines of Raphael's Madonnas can be said to be from a Lion's claw, the most delicate inflections of Rembrandt's drawings of Saskia, from a Tiger's. Some Picasso minotaurs are from both.

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Italians always knew the difference between a line and wet noodle. Neighborhood people so appreciated Cimabue's draftsmanship in the picture of Our Lady for the church of Santa Maria Novella, they called the place the Joyful District. But after the show of Julian Schnabel's recent works on paper at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, the neighborhood might have been called the Sad District (although it's hard to believe Schnabel can be all bad if critics are unanimous against him). Many viewers were too unsophisticated by today's standards to understand these works were drawings. A paleolithic audience would have been even more puzzled. It's no historical accident there are no drawings like this in the caves at Lascaux. Cave people were too rude, their drawings too genuinely crude, to be formless. The very notoriety of the work made abundantly clear, the master draftsman would have gone the way of the master swordsman long ago, with a click of the shutter, and a boot from the museums, if persons who draw were not continually being born, oblivious of the latest art-world trends.

Dazzled, if not shell-shocked, by the explosion of form in Rome, Vasari never gave color its due. It was perhaps easier to place in perspective after three hundred years and Turner. Ruskin wrote that when color enters the picture at all, "everything must be sacrificed to it." He also said, in his endearing style, what Vasari could not bring himself to admit: "the Venetians always saw this, and all great colorists see it, and are thus separated from the non-colorists, or schools of mere chiaroscuro, by being right while others are wrong." *Sfumatezza* differs from the more familiar chiaroscuro in its delicacy, as Rembrandt differs from Murillo. Leonardo invented it. In his *Annunciation*, the modeling of the angel's wing and of the hand raised in salutation is so soft as to be imperceptible. Titian learned from Giorgione, who picked up the idea from Leonardo, according to Vasari. Titian's *Shepherd and Nymph* is more Keatsian than Keats's figures on a Grecian urn, "for ever panting and for ever young," odic in its proportions. Yet shadowed by and surfacing through Titian's *colorito*, his rare *sfumatezza*, is Classic form.

Both *disegno* and *colorito* are informed by the brush. Titian softened edges with his fingers; Rembrandt's brushes were well worn; Turner used hog brushes, Sargent, only sable. Renoir preferred a tapered brush, Cézanne, a square. Pollock reached for a brush only as an afterthought, and used his whole body in the act of painting. Hals had the most informative brush of any painter, quick and quickening. But he used only hand, wrist, and arm, no longer aesthetically correct. The bowels were not in his painterly frame of reference. Hals sacrificed some technical depth, the luminous white core of the Venetians, Rembrandt's underpainting, to the immediacy of his brush, though Seymour Slive explains he did block out lights, darks, and colors beforehand, often picking up and mixing the underpainting with the next layer. It's well known that the Impressionists altogether abandoned underpainting, and with it, the volumes of the Old Masters. Brushwork appears to be anathema nowadays, in the unnatural quest for novelty. But artists as unlike as Manet and Sargent learned from Hals, and whatever they painted their brushwork was high. Van Gogh had vision, and revered and emulated Hals the way Kafka did Dickens, but his own Hemingwayesque brushwork did not come as easily. No matter how hard anyone tried, no one was ever doomed to repeat the wonder of Hals's brush.

Ever since the Armory show, there has been a deep taboo against informative brushwork, not the fake taboos everybody breaks. But, doubtless, in time, it will become clear that many moderns not only refused to paint well, but had less to say, and some brush people did, and loved Beauty, which is the more rare. Robert Henri's real crime was not his refusal to be modern, but casting in his lot with the other seven, who lacked his painterly strengths. Clara Beaux never lived in France, but she could paint as many shades of white as an Eskimo has words for snow. Frank Duveneck and Frank Dumont

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perpetrated the teaching of painting as it was once known for many years at the Art Students League and Pratt in New York. They may be minor compared to the Great Bears, but not without gifts. They provided something for Hans Hofmann and his students to be against, and they offered alternate routes, crisscrossing paths in the wilderness back and forth between centuries (the nineteenth and the twenty-first). But Henri was no Manet, and neither was particularly interested in the flowering of the cinquencento, more's the pity. Today, with drawing and brushwork all but outlawed in many circles, and color rare, art has arrived in the electronic age. Never has the crude been so rapidly manufactured.

The awesome, as the word suggests, is that which inspires awe or fear. It's what Burke meant by the sublime, the way cave people felt when the sun rose, or the night fell. Down through the ages, notions of the awesome have ranged from God and Tragedy to the merely weird, and, most recently, in the new usage, MTV, which inspires neither awe nor fear, except in the ratings. Aristotle may have pooh-poohed Comedy, but birth and rebirth are also awesome, as we saw in the Renaissance, and it is arguable which is more ennobling, to die, or to be born. But never has the awesome been so blow-dried. In the past, the awesome was Dionysian, or libidinous forces mirrored in Nature, the return of the repressed, Lucifer, Blake's Tiger. It was thunder, lightning, and fathomless seas, Nature as we know it and outer space, light, dark, and more, "darkness visible," soul. It was Michaelangelo. In its Gothic-novel manifestations it was the landscape on the way to the castle of Nosferatu in the Werner Herzog film. Awe and fear propelled the so-called primitive work in the "Primitivism" show, and modernism sanctioned the fake primitive and the fearfully awesome, but the awesomely beautiful became taboo, except in the movies, though Rothko was not afraid of the awesome beauty of saturated color. Kurosawa's Macbeth with a battalion of spears in his chest like a tribal fetish is an awesome image, the vault of Saint John the Divine is an awesome space, and *Paradise Lost* is the most awesome poem ever written. Goya's Black Paintings are awesome, and Turner didn't lash himself to a mast in a snowstorm to be picturesque. Since the Forties, artists have tried and failed to do with enormous canvases what artists as unlike as Turner and Picasso did with Imagination. Vestiges of the awesome can be seen in bombardments of electronic images in multimedia works for the most part out of touch with Nature. The possibility of being crushed under a Richard Serra sculpture can be said to be awesome, but not the way Rodin's *Gates of Hell* is awesome.

The Holocaust broke the back of the awesome, calling into question the fittingness of any aesthetic category or art to describe it. But the "style" of Anselm Kiefer's MOMA retrospective can be said to be awesomely low in approaching the Nazi experience. The size of the canvases, the sewage textures, oppressive grays and browns, burned clumps of straw, in their very ubiquity, transcend style and achieve solemnity.

In its new debased form, the awesome is awesomest, and the fearsome fearsomest, in criticism that has lost all sense of proportion. M. Derrida himself provides the metaphor in his essay on Van Gogh—"once more around," four times, like a beast circling its prey. And the prey is meaning itself, the very being of a work of art, which means because it is. And it is, and always was, more than the random object such criticism reduces it to. The little soiled blankets appearing in SoHo galleries nowadays are M. Derrida's true subject, not Van Gogh. In these, Deconstruction finds a subject worthy of itself.

Are artists idiots? If art can mean everything the fecund critic says it means, it means nothing; it doesn't even exist. If a soda bottle is as instructive for the purposes of Marxist critics as a Velázquez, let them focus on soda bottles and leave art for those who see it. This is not to say the lineaments of, for example, the Coca-Cola bottle are not elegant, or that such critics are al-

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together blind. But their misplaced inventiveness, the high erudition and low sense of proportion is the very shape of ooze. The influence of such criticism has crept upon the universities and museums in the guise of a leveling kind of eclecticism (there are other kinds) that undermines the genuine appreciation not only of Western culture, but of other cultures as well. George Orwell made the deeper point in his essay on "Politics and the English Language"—if we don't care or are unable to distinguish the real from the fake, thought from cliché, how can we begin to understand the world news? Cave people depended for their very survival on being able to tell when to worship and when to run, but so-called experts spawned by such criticism are not so astute. Never has the awesome been so bogus.

Vasari would have appreciated the roles Hofmann and Duveneck played in transmitting arts worth engaging, undoing, or even building upon. But the art world today is afflicted by a Wild West frontier mentality—trash the past and move on. Art historians and critics suffer from it as well as artists trapped between ruptures. But the strongest art involves fine distinctions, not just obvious extrapolation to the furthest-out undoing. "Far out" as Picasso was, he always knew this, and looked back to Greece and into Africa, analyzing and re-forming a past in his way. The Abstract Expressionists pushed the outer limits of painting more than the inner and got stuck. Vasari was concerned Uccello would run into similar problems and possibly unhinge his brain from "too severe studies" in perspective, and advised him to go back to drawing. The Florentines did this and advanced without trashing anything.

It's hard to find a Lion or Tiger on West Broadway or Superior Street nowadays, but a person doesn't have to go to mainstream galleries to find aesthetically correct art (which is not to say all such work is fake —the question is why is it aesthetically correct, and is there anything else to it?). At Artemnesia, on Chicago's Carpenter Street in the River West district with its outpouring of ample spaces so prized in the East, Jenny Morlan flooded wall-sized canvases with melting pink and orange lipstick, somehow spacious, punctuated with army-green choppers that didn't get off the ground. The colors could be obtained more simply with paint which would allow the artist to do more, and it's not clear whether she intends to stunt her growth by continuing to work mainly in lipstick and nail polish. The work was a far cry from ooze, but Artemnesia Gentileschi might have thought there's a very good reason it's new.

And what would Manet say now? The serious undoing of painting began with his deprecation of Giorgione in *Lunch on the Grass*. He was more of a painter than Ingres, whose line was so exquisite it almost didn't matter. And, given the pass to which academicians had brought painting, his handling of paint looked fresh, but at a cost. Today, artists don't know what to reject next. But a true Avant-Garde can at least find the frontier.

Between the leap into perfect form and the search for Self and Mars, the frontier has shifted inward. But, especially, as long as artists themselves have different traits, trends will always swing back and forth. Blake said, "To generalize is to be an Idiot" (surely aware he was doing just that and of the occasional need for it). He found the highest art and morality in Minute Particulars, a term first used by Boswell. For him, each Minute Particular was ultimately a Human Being, and critical thinking more than a meaningless intellectual exercise. In Blake's sense, each zek in *The Gulag* was a Minute Particular, each voice, each story, voice upon voice, story upon story, remembered, remembering, not so different from ours. Lara shoots Komarovsky and Pasternak is exiled. David Copperfield declares he was born. Spenser takes a walk by the Thames. Dante comes to a dark wood, but it could be you or me. These are very different "I"s, from the condemned to the self-affirming and self-extinguishing, but it is they who show us ourselves, and are poten-

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tially "subversive," not the agglutinated prose of Fredric Jameson, or "significant statements" about people in general.

The personal in visual art as well has always addressed a central question asked by Bernardo in the opening line of *Hamlet*, "Who's there?" Today, some artists refuse to say. But down through the ages, like voice, the artist's hand, in all its periods and styles, has tried to answer, and non-artists appreciated the attempt. Being born in an "incompetent age," as Vasari put it, did not stop Giotto from painting a Crucifix in a field of gold appreciated all the more because it was from his hand. The same can be said of abstract art. The sparkling fury of Krasner's brush and hand in *Polar Stampede* at her MOMA retrospective was more hard-hitting than Pollock's flung drips, for all their fine complexity, because she was more connected to the canvas, but there's more than one way to connect. The metaphors of color and pure form—round, jagged, vertical, prone, big, diminutive, etc.—underscore the artist's voice or hand (not all there in sprayed-looking surfaces). In Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, the answer to "Who's there?" was a community of individuals, not lemmings, and the Italian Renaissance.

Questions of identity have always been part of the fascination of portraits as well. Every brushstroke, scumble, and smudge can say something. In Sargent's portrait of Henry James, at the IBM gallery several years ago, every brushstroke reveals character. The gaze from the recesses of the eyes is that of the writer who could see through Osmond in one look, not the choreographer of tête-à-têtes, and the portrait tells more about Sargent than the women in white satin will ever tell.

Personal art, true "subversiveness," or persuasion works through the power of Imagination "to awake in the minds of others a kindred feeling," as Coleridge said. These mirror glances are meetings of thought and perception, of an inner disposition or memory of contiguous experiences or linked ideas with shared ones. Everyone is born. Not everyone thinks it matters. But, reading *David Copperfield*, one sees it does, and declares the event, with an enhanced sense of dignity and moment, frowned on by some regimes. In a similar, different way, as the snow falls on "The Dead," or a Bruegel scene, we see the interconnectedness of all elements. And the truest art helps us to see more.

The Florentines valued Imagination because it helped them so see natural forms, and the spirit informing them. Nature was the primary text, and, after Nature, Leonardo advised young artists to study only the work of the most skilled masters. His view on most secondary texts was that he or she "who can go to the fountain, does not go to the water-jar." There have always been artists who prefer the water-jar, but to this day, others would rather stare, as Leonardo wrote, into the embers of a dying fire, or at "a wall spotted with stains" in which "landscapes . . . appear confusedly, like the sound of bells in whose jangle you may find any name or word you choose to imagine." This is how the Greeks saw Daphne fluttering in the leaves, the Great Bear in the stars, how children, lying in a field, see snow-capped mountains in the clouds rise and fade away; but only poets see the jangling of bells. This exercise for the creative faculties in vogue in Leonardo's day was, we should keep in mind, intended only *for practice*. Leonardo himself was more challenged by a smile. But, today, it seems, many, though by no means all, artists are no longer interested in challenging themselves, content to be the mirror of whatever feeds them. Leonardo had something to say about that too, which is, just as still water becomes "putrid, talent without exercise deteriorates" (i.e., Kiefer's style without his meaning).

Imagination has a local address, but it's arguable whether culture, or technology and availability of materials, defines the forms imaginable in a log, quarry, landslide. Marble lends itself to more articulation than limestone, etc. But the moon over an English copse or a bamboo grove is still the moon, the contemplative mind itself still contemplative.

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Audiences everywhere recognize filial ingratitude in the example Coleridge uses to distinguish mere fancy from Imagination: Otway's "Lutes, lobsters, seas of milk, and shapes of amber" from Shakespeare's "What! have his daughters brought him to this pass?" Responses to the most fundamentally human experiences tend to cross cultures, for all the prevarications of our anthropology. The truly awesome is universal.

In his refutation of Bishop Berkeley, Dr. Johnson showed thought connects to something real. This is as true of music and the visual arts as of language. Though it may be profitable, any argument can't be thrust on any work without lying. Nonsense and ooze go hand-in-hand, and it is the artist's job to restore meaning *to form*, not the text-traducer's all but to hallucinate it in any cultural artifact he or she happens to chance upon. Just by coming into existence, line, color, body, *are and mean* more immediately and powerfully than needlesss exposition, and this is often what artists mean when they say "it is what it is." But if it's any good at all, art is true.

All children differentiate themselves from their parents in the same way: by saying no, and nay-saying is the predominant mode of visual art today. But in the infancy of painting, artists learned from one another. And, beyond the Orc cycle, they will once again be able to imagine saying yes some of the time. In those "distant deeps and skies" criticism served Truth, and artists remember Beauty is often more powerful than "significant statements" because it can make ideas desirable. But they don't forget some ideas are better adapted to scatology. Everyone realizes it is impossible to talk about masses of people, without first being able to see *a person*, and even then it's iffy. Artists may be truly rude, but vulgarity is not required. Their work may be as high as they can reach, without bad repercussions. They don't have to be crude to be contemporary, and can draw like Raphael if they want to. Nor is the awesome thrust upon them; the most delicate refinements can be called post-modern. Ooze gets informed, and form is begotten. There are shows of hands. Poets tune their pipes to the water's fall,[4] not too cynical to give an iamb. And form follows life, from the Lion's and from the Tiger's claw.

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4 Spenser's *The Shepherdes Calendar*, "April," 1.36.

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Sex, the Sixties & Camille Paglia

by Donald Lyons

Camille Paglia's new collection, *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, shows the belligerent and pyrotechnical polymath in a number of poses, from sober critic to flamboyant celebrity spouting hyperbolic opinions.[1] There are tossed-off op-ed pieces, more or less traditional book reviews, autobiographical musings, and a memoir of an intercultural teaching experiment. Most substantive are the transcript of an MIT lecture (plus Q & A), and a long article called "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders" that, originating as a review for *Arion* of two books of classical gay studies, swells into an exposé of the methodologically and intellectually shaky foundations of all such "social constructionist" enterprises and winds up with high-minded suggestions for curricular reform in more or less traditional directions. MIT was the "home institution" of one of her *Arion* targets, and thus the long lecture given there four months after that issue of *Arion* appeared was in the nature of a preemptive strike into enemy country.

The *Arion* piece is Paglia at her best. Confronted with a half-baked and smugly dehumanizing ideology (here, the notion that sexual differences, and indeed sexuality, have no grounding in nature), she marshals formidable learning in art history and anthropology to expose its inaccuracies and absurdities. She is eager to show, for example, the fraudulence of John Winkler's claim to have, in his *Constraints of Desire*, treated Sappho frankly at last. Victorian prudery or Wilhelmine stuffiness (I am thinking of the great Wilamowitz's presentation of Sappho as a sort of abbess of an Aphroditic nunnery) did not wait for Winkler to blow them down. The "homosexuality of Sappho's lyrics" was a scholarly commonplace at least as early as the 1950s. Indeed, as Paglia says, Winkler, whose "final contribution is to ransack Sappho's lyrics for references to clitorises," ends by de-eroticizing the Lesbian poet.

With the two books in smoking ruins, Paglia launches her reformist proposals, which envisage the abolition of gay, black, and women's studies—indeed, all such specialist ghettos—and the immersion of teachers and students alike in rigorous interdisciplinary surveys. It sounds in fact like the reformist ideas proposed at Columbia University seventy years ago that led to the Humanities and Gen Ed courses which were until yesterday college staples in America. I fear Paglia is a bit naïve, however, in her confidence that beginning Western Civ courses in "black" Mother Egypt is going to satisfy the separatist and leveling appetites of the multiculturalists.

Paglia identifies the founding spirits of the fissiparous victim-study fiefdoms of academe today as Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault, and at them she emits geysers of scorn. They are in fact, though, yesterday's villains, and Paglia's prodigies of contempt

1 *Sex, Art, and American Culture: Essays*, by Camille Paglia; Vintage, 337 pages, $13 paper.

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already look a bit dated. The horse is dead.

The *Arion* review conserves a relative decorum, a decorum exuberantly shattered in its sister piece, the MIT lecture. With machine-gun brio, Paglia articulates, not for the first or the last time, her personal *mythos.* It goes like this: born in 1947, she squirmed in the 1950s under "the Catholic Church . . . at its most dogmatic and censorious" and under "the cloistered sterility of late New Criticism." Came the Sixties, that tsunami of liberation, that high noon of sex and drugs and rock and roll. The "iconoclastic psychedelic" Sixties, "rebelling against Fifties bourgeois conformity and respectability, took life to its extreme and explored the far edges of the possible." "Energy. *Energy* was the Sixties!" Paglia was then attending Harpur College of the State University of New York at Binghamton, which she rather grandiloquently dubs "sort of like Berkeley East at that time, seething with real radicals." For all her promise there and later at Yale under Harold Bloom she pronounces her subsequent academic career "a disaster, an absolute disaster. I could not get hired anywhere"—largely because, to hear her tell it, of her inveterate Sixties itch to challenge authority, to be a gadfly, to point out loudly the nakedness of the new imperial orthodoxies. She was out there all alone, owing allegiance to no sect: "Now, when people call *me* a neocon, what kind of idiots are they? I'm someone who is on the record as being pro-pornography—all the way through kiddie porn and snuff films. I'm pro-prostitution—I mean *really* pro, not just pro-prostitute and against prostitution. I'm pro-abortion, pro-homosexuality, pro-drag queens, pro-legalization of drugs. *This* is neoconservative?" No, this is the Paglia who desperately wants to be loved by the Left, even as she anatomizes their pathologies and hesitates not to brand some of them with the "f" word: furious at feminist hostility to a Rolling Stones lyric, she lashes out at the "fascism of the contemporary women's movement"; disgusted at such militant gay tactics as "outing" and the tossing around of words like "homophobic" and "genocide," she wails, "This is fascism! This is fascism!"

But she persists in seeing such phenomena as distorting rigidifications of Sixties libertarianism, as authoritarian perversions of the dreams she fought for in Binghamton. Foucault has murdered Blake. And she casts herself not as mere analyst but as firebrand (rather Marxist this), as Delacroix's bare-breasted *Liberty Leading the People*: "So what I'm trying to do is to mobilize and radicalize the liberals who have been silent and who have let academe be taken over by these opportunists, these sickening, disgusting, ass-kissing opportunists. . . . Come out, come out, wherever you are! Come back. Take over the cultural center again."

It is hard not to enjoy someone who so vigorously assaults some of the reigning lunacies and who so operatically risks the ridiculous in projecting a comic persona. I like Paglia, flayer of liberals, scourge of orthodoxies. I like her. She is even, in doses, readable in that demotic prose which nags and pokes and jabs and buttonholes and elbows. "What gives?" "Since when . . . ?" "*Please!*" She juggles her words with an eye to entertain, and much can be forgiven an entertainer. But it is also necessary to examine this polymorphous myth of the perverse, all-permitting Sixties, which ubiquitously serves Paglia's prose as a rhetoric of self-definition and a strategy of attack. If the Sixties were anything more than unzippered hedonism, why did they achieve, rock for the moment aside, so amazingly little? Paglia mumbles and fumbles here: "We of the Sixties had wonderful ideals, but then we were very arrogant . . . we had wonderful ideas but we were naïve about the length of time it takes to effect institutional change. It was almost like a great wave came and knocked us down . . . With me it wasn't sex, it wasn't drugs, with me it was challenging authority. . . . And I just had to learn my lessons." What lessons? Well, to her credit, she does say that "everyone who preached free love in the Sixties is responsible for AIDS. And we must accept moral responsibility for

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it. This idea that it was somehow an accident, a historical accident, a microbe that sort of fell from heaven—absurd. We must *face* what we did." OK, but where does that leave her ululation summoning the Sixties faithful to crawl out of their tepees and put on the old warpaint? And what about any recognition of "moral responsibility" for tomorrow's consequences of such Paglia campaign planks as free drugs and kiddie porn? She seems in fact to yearn, powerfully, for—not a revisionist account of the Sixties, but for their revival. The Sixties are her addiction. She must enter a twelve-step detox program.

It is hard, finally, to escape the conclusion that the object of her longing is not so much the Sixties as her youth ("It is Margaret she mourns for"). Like many Romantics (like the Romantic in us all), she is unwilling to let it go; she wishes to reheat its ardors and re-enact its divine excesses. Wordsworth chronicled both his initial excitement at the French Revolution—

> Not in my single self alone I found,
> But in the minds of all ingenuous Youth,
> Change and subversion from that hour.
> . . . . . .
> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
> But to be young was very Heaven!

—and his subsequent disillusionment and breakdown. He did not then agitate for a redaction of the French Revolution. But Paglia's prophetic needle seems stuck in the groove of Blake's Oothoon: "I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" (Almost paradoxically, Paglia the critic, as readers of *Sexual Personae* know, is preternaturally alert to the protocols of deception, domination, and pain that ensnare happy, happy Love when in tandem with sex.) "True liberation for homosexuals, for lesbians," she forecasts, "will happen only when we can break through these stereotypes and allow for the free flow of desire, for spontaneity, for humor," just as things once were, in fact, when Paglia was in college and was experimenting sexually under the influence of French movies and going "with the flow in the Sixties way."

Again, though, when Paglia defends the complexities of human sexual behavior against the black-and-white sexual-harassment and date-rape police, when she warms to Clarence Thomas as well as to Anita Hill, she is a courageous and sane voice speaking from a human center. Sexual attraction must, she insists, bring (socialized) danger and mystery and fun into play. Mechanistic and egalitarian victim-scenarios quantify and bleed life. But her reactionary fantasy of a 1960s utopia is preposterous. A return to the Sixties? Love-ins? Psychedelic clothing? Bad hair? New anatomies, new diseases?

What did the Sixties do? In the first place, the whole fetish of "decades" is a childish superstition. Anything can be done with them. For example, while excited journalists like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer produced panting topicalities like *In Cold Blood* (1966) and *Armies of the Night* (1968), Evelyn Waugh was, in 1961, finishing his tragic war trilogy and Vladimir Nabokov was, in 1969, publishing his late masterwork *Ada*. Time, I am confident, will forget the former and remember the latter. There was, perhaps, less memorable writing done in the Sixties than in the despised decades that came before and after. But for Paglia it was all a Golden Age, to whose resuscitation she summons both liberals and "people who have drifted toward the neoconservative side." But there is no parade following the leader. The liberals will never go where she wants them, at least never under her banner; they will, with timorous qualifications and demurrals, creep into the cultural-totalitarian tent. See Martha Nussbaum in a recent *New Republic* on the need for gay studies. It will take an Orwell risen from their own ranks. If that. As for the neocons signing up for her Sixties Revival show, well, this neocon can only echo Yeats: "Get you gone . . . though with blessings on your head."

In a recent *Vanity Fair* article about her, Paglia claims to be "radicalizing the neo-

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conservatives" because of their alleged fondness for her book, which "contains pornographers, prostitutes, drag queens, sadomasochists, and so on"—the usual roundup of Paglia's suspects (more notional and sex-in-the-head than real). In fact, a notice in these pages took discriminating exception to her casual traffic in de Sade.[2] No one, least of all conservatives, is swallowing the Paglia brew undiluted. And insofar as she is the enemy of Mrs. Grundy, it is she who is a welcome recruit. For all who make or think about art must be what Eliot, praising Racine and Baudelaire, called "curious explorers of the soul." It needs no ghost come from the Sixties to tell us that.

The writer in *Vanity Fair* went on to say that Paglia could never "become a card-carrying neocon" because "neoconservatism cannot, will not accommodate popular culture." "Accommodate popular culture" is good, coming from *Vanity Fair*. My dictionary defines "accommodate" as "do a favor for; oblige; contain comfortably." *Vanity Fair* (and soon, no doubt, *The New Yorker*) can be relied on to give us all lessons on the painless and profitable "accommodation" of popular culture. Doing favors is the very raison d'être of such publications. But since Paglia does attempt to bestride all cultures like a colossus, it may be necessary to discuss some of her popular-culture pieces if only to gauge the contours and the sureness of her sensibility there. Take movies. Dubbing the Sixties "a great age of cinema," she cites *Last Year at Marienbad*, *Persona*, *Blow-Up*, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and the Marx Brothers. Of course, as she artlessly admits in the next breath, this is nothing but the program of the campus art house she haunted. *Persona* aside, the list is shaky and the logic shakier: if I see *Citizen Kane* tonight, does that make the Nineties a great age of cinema? Paglia likes stars and likes likening herself to stars: "I felt like Faye Dunaway lounging in her mules and white satin negligee"; "My sign? I'm an Aries. What do you *think*? Bette Davis, Joan Crawford—*please!*"; "My devotion to Elizabeth Taylor began in the late Fifties. . . . At one point, I had collected 599 pictures of her. . . . Elizabeth Taylor is, in my opinion, the greatest actress in film history." It is not that Paglia is opinionated here or that she is wrong, although she is both. It is that she considers this fanzine gush a condign mode of discussing what she herself calls an art form. What would she think of a student who treated, say, *Wuthering Heights* in such language?

Take music. Her quick allusions to Sixties popular music (greatly to be dilated upon, one gathers, in the second volume of *Sexual Personae*) include tributes to the Rolling Stones (especially "my idol, Keith Richards, who made menacing music out of the Dionysian darkness"), Jimi Hendrix (". . . in the blazing psychedelic guitar work of this black genius, time, space, form, voice, person were deconstructed . . ."), the Beach Boys, Dylan, and the Supremes. The choices are unstartling; the comment on Hendrix has, except for the dreary epithet "psychedelic," her characteristic wit (I think of her comparison, in *Sexual Personae*, of Sappho to George Herbert for tone); the comment on Richards is watery and formulaic. Much has been written on these musicians; breathless rapture is not enough.

In more recent music, Paglia lauds Madonna for possessing "both the dynamic Dionysian power of dance and the static Apollonian power of iconicism." Paglia painstakingly describes not, to be sure, the music of Madonna (even her admirers admit the actual music is mediocre) but her videos, which are wont to deploy religious artifacts and sadomasochistic paraphernalia in contiguity and with a desperate desire to shock. And Paglia bites: "Madonna has made a major contribution to the history of women. She has rejoined and healed the split halves of woman: Mary the Blessed Virgin and holy mother, and Mary Magdalene, the harlot." Poor Madonna, recipient of such a lead valentine. It is, of course, a grotesque overestimation of these joyless and ugly videos that struggle so hard, in their suburban way,

2 "In the Footsteps of Sade," by Roger Kimball, March 1990, pp. 7-12.

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to be outrageous. Madonna is, as F. R. Leavis said of the Sitwells, a figure in the history of publicity, not of art. (A truly discriminating sensibility would, in this field, turn today to k. d. lang, who is worth a million Madonnas.)

Paglia unwisely reprints a *New York Times* op-ed plea for subvention of rock musicians by government agencies and corporations and universities. "They should be encouraged to read, to look at paintings and foreign films, to listen to jazz and classical music." This risible proposal—"Today we are going to the Tate, Mr. Rotten"; "What did you think of *Marienbad*, Ice-T?"—is almost endearing in its revelation of the "Apollonian" schoolmarm lurking within the "Dionysian" hipster.

Apollo and Dionysus, that overworked pair of gods, the Hope and Crosby (or perhaps better the Martin and Lewis) of Olympus, are trotted out again when Paglia needs a vocabulary to explain what she esteems in Robert Mapplethorpe, whom she calls "my spiritual brother" and who "unites sharp-edged Apollonian form with melting Dionysian content." To her credit, Paglia does not flinch from describing the exact content of his most explicit photographs. And she embraces their status as "pornography." In both respects, she does more than do Mapplethorpe's liberal supporters on *The New York Times* and the networks. She sees; she speaks; she likes. A photograph that variously depicts genitalia and blood seems to Paglia "to symbolize everything I had found in the turbulent sexual history of mankind . . . the harsh truths faced by our Sixties generation, whose quest for sexual freedom ended in disaster." These cozy Sixties mantras seem, however, inadequate to the spectacle presented by Mapplethorpe's photographs. And Paglia goes on to bathe the work in religiose rhetoric: "Sadomasochism is a sacred cult, a pagan religion that reveals the dark secrets of nature," etc. All this celebratory language seems to miss the tragic element in the photography.

Paglia's hypnotized stupor before the photos and her inability to see around them, so to speak, to their story is symptomatic. She excels, as one realizes in thinking about *Sexual Personae*, at incantatory evocations of static icons, at ecphrasis of iconostasis. Superb on ancient art and on emblematic writing such as Spenser's, she can fall into luridly reductive Freudian formulaicness when treating a story, a narrative, a process. In her explication of *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, Heathcliff = Emily Brontë; Cathy = Maria Brontë, a dead older sister; crypto-theme = hermaphroditic lesbianism. The work of Henry James she spends the most time on is the gothically kitschy *Turn of the Screw*. The frozen and the static are her terrain, and her expository swagger thereon can be (to use a Paglianic word) ravishing. But even there she is apt to overvalue such poseurs as Swinburne and Pater. She has yet, though, to manifest an equal aptitude for capturing story—be it male epic or female novel. She needs less attention to attitude and more to process, less "voguing" and more dancing.

I close on a monitory note. Camille Paglia is at home in the bibliotheque, dear to Apollo, and fancies herself at home in the discotheque, domain of Dionysus. What she really must avoid, however, is the agora, haunt of Hermes, where all is vanity and nothing is fair.

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Poems *by Andrew Hudgins, William Logan, David R. Slavitt & Jessica Hornik*

Milton

In the White Bear inside the huge Spread Eagle
in a house leased from Baptist Hicks, he was born
"a stone's throw from the Mermaid Tavern."
And from a third-floor room he gazed
east to Bow Church, south to All Hallows, Bread Street,
where he was baptized, and, beyond, to Queenstithe,
the Thames, and distant Parkside.

As his eyes failed, his favorite Bible verse
became, *for in my weakness is my strength.*
He woke at four. By seven, verses filled his head,
and when the amanuensis
came late, he grumbled at his wife and daughters,
"I'm ready to be milked."

Outside the walls of London, blind, his great
work nearly done, the master smelled the fire,
the great fire as it soared inside the walls
and consumed White Bear, Spread Eagle, All Hallows, Bread Street,
and a small house he'd leased there called the Rose.

—*Andrew Hudgins*

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Blue tree

A color-wheel lit tinsel branches red,
blue, green, and yellow. And from the attic, we pulled
the box of used and re-used Christmas bows,
and wrapping paper bought last January.
I checked my presents, which I'd picked at—even,
when necessary, unwrapped and rewrapped.
I knew them all. They never seemed enough.
Even the lavish piles in storybooks
seemed paltry, limited, compared to what
I could imagine getting. The color-wheel creaked.
Bright colors spun across the tinseled branches
until, at last, I wondered what they meant.
Green, sure, for summer. Red, for fall, and yellow
for those last clinging leaves before the limbs
blow empty. But blue, what did blue mean?
The color wheel churned: red tree, green tree, blue tree.
It meant deep snow, impossibility, or sorrow.
It meant somebody liked the color blue.
Around the changing tree, we opened gifts
officially. The color-wheel creaked and churned
through its four colors until one year it stuck
and the yellow melted. We took the tree apart,
and boxed it. Blue meant the damn thing wouldn't die.

—*Andrew Hudgins*

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After a line by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Southampton, Hot Springs, and Tuxedo Park:
lost in the backwash of the Crash, the War,
the refugees of grace were washed ashore.
The girls who once were "miffed" or "truly vexed"

would soon acquire the morals of a shark,
waltzing the railroad barons round the floor,
their cold, triumphant necks a jewelry store.
And in the shadows the next drink, and the next.

Where does it go, the moment of desire?
Lost, rattling down the Special's corridor,
the distant vein of lights in semaphore;
lost, the champagne glasses tossed against the fire,
the bullet laid inside a lower drawer.
And there is love, cruel love, the last to bore.

—*William Logan*

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Scordatura

Scordatura, literally "discord," means
any unusual tuning of a stringed instrument

For the fifteen mysteries Biber's mysterious
scordaturas made the fiddle
sing new resonances, stark
or mellow timbres. It's a trick,
to enable otherwise awkward chords,
make octaves easy, or parallel thirds . . .

The spirit leaps—it always does
at certain kinds of music, at
animal cries, or the wails of babies,
lovers, the newly bereaved. The devil
plays on the fiddles of our heartstrings,
with scordaturas to silence angels
or make them weep. He's showing off
his virtuosity, and we
applaud his instrumentalism
until our red palms sting in the pain
of dungeons, sick rooms, or, on stages,
Oedipus' howls, or Lear's rages.
Their echoes resonate, enlarging
our own distressing repertoires.

—*David R. Slavitt*

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Key in hand

It could happen: we come home to find
the kitchen flooded, cat gone
down the fire escape, all the typos in all the books
burrowed like fleas in the rug. The walls have
the disconcerting blankness
of correction fluid. Worst of all, our keepsakes
have jumped ship, they are no less and no more
anchored in this world than the snapped stems
of the spent geraniums. No, the worst—
the terrible things we've said to each other, aloud
and in our soundproof dreams,
pock the ceilings, dangle like the fringes
of the Mexican blanket. This would be
the bursting of two good lives into an unrequited
craving, loosed in the apartment like a child
left at home alone for the first time.

—*Jessica Hornik*

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Art

The distance of Mantegna

by Creighton Gilbert

It is certainly unusual for a newspaper critic to recommend an art exhibition as "an absolute must" while at the same time warning his readers that they will have difficulty enjoying it. It is even more surprising to find the same point made in the catalogue accompanying the show. But the recent traveling exhibition devoted to the work of the Renaissance master Andrea Mantegna occasioned both.[1]

In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, the late Lawrence Gowing writes that Mantegna "gives us as many reasons to dislike him as any great artist." Here Gowing, rightly admired for his ability to articulate sensitive responses to paintings, is talking as a painter. He goes on to say, with his endearing insularity—or British provinciality—that "among modern painters perhaps only Wyndham Lewis has really loved him." Gowing is presumably reporting a fact of personal biography, something that one could not infer from Lewis's work. On much the same basis, I can say quite a few American artists have strong pro-Mantegna feelings, and I have a theory to explain it.

Painters, when inspecting the work of an artist they admire, perhaps even more when the artist is from the past, are likely to focus on the question, How did he manage to get this or that effect? Mantegna, it seems to me, is the rare artist who made a point of revealing how he did it. His art includes, in effect, a how-to manual, as an integral part of a style that is in any case intensely systematic and full of demonstrations of procedure. He does not merely employ perspective, as most artists did at the time, he also gives us elaborate presentations of its capacities and bases. He shows the same thing in his exact and thorough "appropriations"—they are nothing less, and again are rare—from works of ancient classical art. These are the two special qualities of Mantegna's art most often mentioned, and they are duly rehearsed again in the catalogue for this show. Mantegna's drawing, precise and thorough, is spider-web-like in both its visible logic and its functional efficiency, and is his vehicle for making these and other reports to viewers. He helps satisfy the learner's drive to take the machine apart as a way of learning how to make another. That he showed an ongoing pleasure in making engravings is, I think, proof that he wished to give his artist-viewers this possibility. Engravings not only expose technical steps with even greater purity than drawings but are also inexpensive ways to circulate them to many viewers near and far.

Writing in *The New York Times*, Michael Kimmelman observed that the exhibition

1 "Andrea Mantegna" was on view in London at the Royal Academy of Arts, January 17-April 5, 1992, and in New York at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, May 5-July 12. A catalogue, edited by Jane Martineau, has been published by Harry N. Abrams/The Metropolitan Museum of Art (499 pages, $65; $39.50 paper).

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was hard to like because it included a choice of objects that made us "wade through rooms of things" only "possibly" by Mantegna "or not by him." For Gowing it was the artist, not the curators, who generated the difficulty. Mantegna's passion for the world of ancient Rome, his "terrific masonry" and "stony imagery," belongs to the same culture that made Virgil and Ovid popular reading, and is distant from ours. Both Kimmelman and Gowing are right.

A third difficulty is that, at least in its New York version, the exhibition did not represent the artist through his chief works, a fact that it did not fairly admit. A candid viewer would suppose from evidence of this show that the artist's focus was on small-scale works, since most of the paintings here were not much bigger than the engravings. Little was done to explain that this is just one side of the artist's work, and not the primary one. We were wrongly told this is the first "comprehensive" exhibition of his work. Not before page 151 of the catalogue do we get the proper comment (it may indeed go too far the other way) that Mantegna's "reputation still rests" on two very big projects—a fresco cycle for the Palazzo Ducale in Mantua and a series of ten-foot-square canvases depicting the Triumphs of Caesar. At the entrance of the exhibition in New York, a label did indeed tell us that we would see "an outstanding collection of small-scale paintings." But the phrasing, with no indication that big ones also exist, seemed disingenuous. One's doubts were not dispelled by the absence of any measurements on the nearby photographs of some other large works not included in the exhibition, units from another fresco cycle, presented like easel paintings in isolation from each other. One of the few clues to the dimensions of Mantegna's work did appear in a photograph of the room of Mantua frescos. Although it was fuzzy, the photograph included a fireplace that gave one a sense of scale.

We think of classicists as academics, and may want to bracket the classical Mantegna with Mengs or, at best, with Ingres. Yet doing so can suggest how unacademic a classicizing painter can be. Mantegna is most obviously unlike Ingres in having only slight involvement with portraits (which, in this show of small and sometimes questionable works, were given disproportionate weight). He focused, in the usual way for his time, on active multi-figure narratives and related imagery. For those, the nearest analogue in the work of Ingres would be just a few big works, such as *Virgil Reading Homer to Augustus* or *The Golden Age*. Those works are classical not only in subject, and in harmonious compositional grouping, but in emotional tone: the classical world is always smooth, a real model for all others to follow. It is clear to all that Mantegna is quite different. The standard formula used to explain what makes him remarkable, dusted off again in the catalogue, tells us that he compensates for being classical by being in touch with live reality: true enough, but not very helpful for anyone not already prepared to like him. I would argue that, in many cases, Mantegna's subjects are far from classical in that he is exercised about dreadful disorder and wrongness in events. Major examples of this, to be sure, are usual subjects for others at the time; one thinks especially of depictions of the killing of saints. But Mantegna also favors such subjects when he was most free to choose, in the engravings.

The most prominent of these draw on topics from antiquity—bacchanals and battles—which were as yet far from common for artists. The battles are very odd. On a wavy ground of water, marine centaurs, bouncing like rowboats, strain to bash each other with large bones; elsewhere, a bearded man riding a sea horse uses a bunch of fish to hit another figure. As to what this is all about, the sole clue is an inscription, "Envy," and there is a good argument that a personal point is here being made: Mantegna's conviction that lesser artists envied him. The bacchanals show little of the dancing and none of the love-making that Titian's famous examples of the genre have made us consider typical; rather they show chiefly drunken movements or collapse into

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sleep. Yet one great contrary force balances all this: the harmonious frieze comprising the composition, the design system that defines classicizing style. Our eyes reassure us that the world's disorder is overwhelmed by the order of this scheme of art.

Other works have as their theme the reimposition of order, accomplished not only by the artist's treatment but by the actors shown. The story of Christ's Descent into Limbo, a subject rare in Mantegna's day, was one which the artist clearly found compelling, for he addressed it repeatedly in several media, and the London version of the show gave emphasis to it. The subject was developed by Christian theologians to cope with the problem that, since only Christ's coming saved mankind from hell, the good people who died earlier were left there. The solution was to describe a special mission by Christ to rescue them. In earlier art, Christ on this occasion generally marches toward the door of hell and rips it off its hinges; usually he is depicted in profile. Mantegna seems to have completely originated a ninety-degree shift, showing Christ from the back, purposefully advancing with lowered head toward a dark cave in the solid rock of the center background. We know he will straighten out what was wrong. New too is the pattern of flying devils at the top of the cave entrance, swarming in disarray like panicked bats. Quite possibly one of Mantegna's stimuli was the related scene in the *Inferno* of Dante, when the devils try to bar access to the city of Dis.

The suggestion that Mantegna was led first to record with great detail the realm of evil disorder, and then to combat it in his imagery, seems most vivid of all in the show's sole instance of a complicated major work by him. This painting is not exceedingly large, but is large enough to have dominated the New York show. Its fascinating intricacy also affected the visitors who dwelled on it, and one may think that the artist knew he could get real attention in this way. The subject—Pallas Athena, the goddess of wisdom, driving vices out of a garden—is unique. The goddess, marching into the picture from the left, is not as conspicuous as the many, scattering, odd-looking vices at the center, whose nasty and dream-like forms are parallel to those of the contemporary Bosch. Likewise, the other virtuous figures in the painting are either anonymous or in the corners. What succeeds in undoing vice here is, primarily, the strict order of the garden, a topiary hedge with a rhythmic arcade. Its tight detail of green leaves is based on the classical and the natural simultaneously.

This picture forms a pair with an entirely harmonious scene, of the Muses performing a dance on Parnassus, and both were bought around 1628 by that great manager of international order, Cardinal Richelieu, and hung in his château. As the catalogue points out, Richelieu later commissioned other paintings for the same space from Poussin; it adds that Poussin's harmonious classicism, with moral freight, shares a tradition with these Mantegnas, as does David's still later. Yet I would not think, as the catalogue proposes, that the analogy is just specifically with these two works of Mantegna's, which Poussin could hardly have seen. He saw the engravings, but perhaps no other work by Mantegna. The engravings retained an astonishing prestige at a time when nearly all early Renaissance art was ignored. This grandest of French traditions of painting, with its "dry" narrative and serious messages—the tradition we schematize with the names Poussin, David, and Cézanne—has its major predecessor in the whole of Mantegna's art. To be sure, at each transmutation it becomes milder. Poussin's preference for showing commendable actions does start to give credibility to the supposed link between the classical and the academic. And David, even more, despite being closer than any other great artist to the effort of destroying a perceived bad system, also paints almost exclusively happy supports of the perceived good system that followed. Cézanne's purely artistic message, to make a real world be more like Poussin's, does remind us that already in Mantegna the artist's private drive was a major carrier of artistic energy, but also that it had then had a wider reference.

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The possibility of such wide speculations suggests that, in a way, the exhibition's focus on small-scale art may not be fatal here. In portraits and madonnas smallness certainly coincides with minor work, but when it comes to the involved compositions of the engravings, there is a case to be made that the small scale is merely physical, and that one is expected to enlarge the images mentally. The use of prints in the Renaissance to reproduce large paintings supports such an idea, but it would call for a proper investigation.

In any case the London view of the exhibition did not suffer in this way, for it included the set of nine ten-foot-square canvases, quite enough to balance all the small works. That made sense. The show was meant in fact in large part as a celebration of the recent major conservation of *The Triumphs of Caesar*. It also had a second motive, to study the engravings and explore some scholarly questions of a quite minute and precise sort about them. It hoped to solve problems of authorship as between Mantegna, his helpers, and his later imitators, by direct style comparisons—that is, by old-fashioned connoisseurship—and in the process to display several examples of the same print, early and late impressions or ones pulled before and after very small revisions. Though of limited interest to the public for blockbusters, such inquiries are often subsidized by them in exhibitions, and can have real results. In this case, however, the basic subjectivity of attributions had a remarkable formal manifestation, in that two rival theories were published side by side in the catalogue, by curators who courteously agreed to differ. This was the more piquant in that, just as the show opened in London, an editorial in the London *Art Newspaper* had singled it out for praise, explaining that the planners had worked together "so that they would reach a consensus of views on [Mantegna] and there would not be those alarming discrepancies between different parts of the catalogue which you find all too often at exhibitions." In the event, the show offered just such discrepancies—if not all that alarming—to an almost unprecedented degree. It also offered, in New York, the available remains of the larger London version—with a very few new additions—and a large new emphasis on a claim to please the general public. The mixture pulled so many ways that the satisfaction of seeing the works survived almost surprisingly.

Even after the show was installed in London, an event that, in principle, might have been expected to supply clearer evidence about attributions, the "discrepancies" continued. If one can rely on a report in a later issue of the *Art Newspaper*, not only did "discrepancies" proliferate at a scholarly symposium on the occasion of the closing in London, but almost all the questions brought up there were in opposition to proposals made in the catalogue by just one of its co-authors, the curator of paintings at the Metropolitan, who had done the entries on the paintings. The consensus that his opinions were often wrong, both about authorship of works attributed to Mantegna and about their dates, seems to me not really so much a reflection on the individual, Keith Christiansen, as on the decision-making and cataloguing system followed, here as elsewhere, with a special role for the curator; to emphasize this, I will use the title rather than his name in what follows.

The curator was not chosen to work on the catalogue or the exhibition because he possessed any credentials as an expert on the artist. As a check, one finds in the catalogue's heavy bibliography four writings by him. One is the book based on his thesis about an artist who died around the time Mantegna was born; a second is an article also on that earlier period which mentions Mantegna in one sentence, citing a painting in the Metropolitan; a third is an article that does not seem to mention Mantegna at all; and the last is an issue of the Metropolitan's *Bulletin*, which offers introductory remarks on its collection of early Italian paintings. It seems, then, that the curator was chosen because he holds the position of curator in the

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museum where the show will be installed. That has become the standard arrangement. The curator becomes a sort of ex officio expert. He then, however, is called on to have opinions, and he indeed does. Apart from the always debatable attributions, these also concern matters of history.

Some of these opinions in the catalogue surprised me enough to make me check them, and they did not stand up. One concerns the famous *Dead Christ in Foreshortening*, with Mary and John (Brera Gallery, Milan), a canvas whose known history only starts in 1806 in Rome. It is usually thought to be the *Christ in Foreshortening* mentioned in 1506, as found in Mantegna's house when he died, and then on record in the same town of Mantua up to 1627, but not afterward. The curator, however, points to an inventory of 1603 in Rome, describing a work "conforming in all respects" to the work we know, an inventory, he adds, which "seems not to have been known" to a recent Mantegna scholar who holds the usual opinion. "There is, therefore, a strong presumption that the Brera Dead Christ is [the Rome picture]."

Well, on the surface, maybe. The location in Rome favors this mildly, but the Mantua picture is certain to have been a real Mantegna, as cannot be affirmed for the work first cited a century later. It is the check of the 1603 inventory's text, describing the *Dead Christ* in Rome as "with two weeping women," not Mary and John, that decides it; the claim of "conforming" to the painting we know isn't tenable. Elsewhere, the curator argues that Mantegna's teacher owned an impression of Pollaiuolo's famous engraving of Ten Naked Men. I had similarly interpreted the document he cites, describing an item in a list of property claimed by the deceased teacher's heirs. What was new and surprising was the curator's further assertion that this document shows the engraving had been stolen from the teacher in 1461; that, he rightly goes on, is a date distinctly earlier than usually assigned to Pollaiuolo's work. But "the current tendency" of some scholars, he feels, to "retard" such dates "has no documentary basis." As it happens, the document actually speaks of two sets of missing property, one taken by the man who left in 1461 and the other only noted as taken during the teacher's lifetime, which continued to 1468 or later. The latter set includes the Pollaiuolo, and so no shift in its date is called for; regrettably it is the curator's reading that doesn't have documentary basis. Both times the curator misread his text, perhaps in the haste of other office duties, then naturally assigned error to the specialist scholars who had read them right, and then went on to make a point of calling them wrong. All this is human, but would not happen if, as in the kind of scholarly writing this catalogue claims on one level to be, the short texts were quoted instead of just paraphrased. It wouldn't even take more space, since the strictures of the correct scholars could then be cut. Lawyers have to give the real data behind their arguments to get a conviction. If curators do not, it is perhaps because they are mainly used to asserting attributions (and condemning those of others) where simple assertion is proper, but then may extend the method to other sorts of art history where it is less applicable.

Just one more case can be mentioned, minute again but relevant. It had been suggested by the truly distinguished London curator Martin Davies that five little paintings by Mantegna now in various places might have constituted a set. But "it is difficult to see," we now read in the catalogue, what two of them "have in common with" a third "beyond their similar dimensions." Davies was a poor scholar, it seems. Yet one is puzzled to be told these dimensions are only "similar," when the greatest difference between any two of the works either in height or width is one inch, whereas a few pages later dimensions differing by more than two inches are called "compatible" in a similar inquiry by the curator. There, too, it is reasonably held that when several works "all depict Old Testament figures" it is an argument that they belonged together; this is equally true of

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Davies's five, making it puzzling why the dimensions were treated as his only argument. Further, all five are grisailles, or monochromes imitating marble, which Mantegna uses in hardly any other small-scale paintings. (They appear in the catalogue well distinguished from other bronze-colored monochromes, though both groups are discussed in a chapter confusingly titled "Paintings in Grisaille.") But far more remarkable if a coincidence, all five little paintings are scenes of one person concerned to kill another with a sword, a knife, or shears. The two persons with swords (which both have their points broken off) have just cut off and hold an evil man's head; the two with knives are both seeking to kill an innocent boy, but are both prevented as we look; Delilah, with the shears, initiates the evil process that brought on Samson's death at the hands of her friends. Mantegna's theme of intensely watched evil and its complements seems here to take one of its most complex forms.

Such awkward research is partly due to a catalogue's needing to be produced on deadline and without peer review, but also, incompatibly, its needing to overawe by footnotes and learning. Professors have more time for their work, but often with the result that their books seem to show learning beyond what has a bearing. Such is the case with Jack Greenstein's new book, which is devoted to one painting by Mantegna, the Uffizi *Circumcision of Christ*.[2] Nevertheless, the author, unlike so many scholarly writers on art, may be welcomed for adhering to the first Hippocratic rule, "Do no harm," for the great bulk of his book largely derives from extending his information far from the specific center. Sometimes this makes one suppose that he is a product of the impoverished sort of humanistic education in which one can become a humanities professor without knowing about such things as the basic difference between nominalist and realist philosophy among the scholastics, so that one must stop to explain that the latter is not the same as "realism" in the usual sense. He would rightly do this with his undergraduate classes—Professor Greenstein teaches in the Visual Arts Department of the University of California, San Diego—but in this book for his peers one gets the sense that he himself had just finished finding it out. Yet he does expound it correctly, so one cannot complain as one can about many books top-heavy in other ways beyond their small subjects, with idiosyncratic theorizing or the like.

The painting he discusses is different from other earlier images of its theme, as the author shows in a conventional proof. He associates its novelties with very refined theological references from a thousand years of religious texts. Since he finds these translated into the painting in very small details, he rightly cannot assign them in the usual way to a patron, for they are too intrinsic. However, when he logically is then led to call Mantegna himself, the painter, "one of the leading historical thinkers of his age" (on the flyleaf) one seems to find only the collapse of the argument. For this, for once, no support is offered, nor could it be, outside the requirements of the author's scheme itself. One really cannot claim that Mantegna "was familiar with Origen's homily," primarily as the author argues on the basis of what is found in the painting. To analyze a single example, part of the author's conclusion: the painting is held to follow a Byzantine symbolism of the theme as a revelation of Christ's divinity. The proof is in one figure's gesture, reaching out to take the Christ child. The Bible says that this figure did take the child and thereafter blessed God. Therefore, he must know Christ was divine, and the painting alludes to this knowledge by showing that he is soon going to take him; that's it. One knows that authors are frequently convinced by arguments as stretched as this. Such arguments are, to be sure, traces of an old desire to devote time to a great artist like Mantegna, and so are another sort of detoured tribute.

2 *Mantegna and Painting as Historical Narrative*, by Jack M. Greenstein; University of Chicago Press, 301 pages, $35.

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Curators & Indians

by Jed Perl

At the back of the catalogue of "Art of the American Indian Frontier," an exhibition currently at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., there's a beautiful memoir, called "A Collector's Life," in which Richard Pohrt recalls how he and his older friend Milford Chandler collected some of the Native American arts and crafts featured in the show.[1] The period is the 1920s and 1930s, the place the Midwest. Pohrt is fifteen, a student in Flint, Michigan, when he meets Chandler, an engineer who's working at the Marvel Carburetor Company, where Pohrt's father has a job. Pohrt had initially gotten interested in Native Americans through stories told by family friends, as well as through fiction popular during the period. He particularly mentions the novels of James Willard Schultz, whose autobiography, *My Life as an Indian*, he calls "an American classic." Chandler invites Pohrt over to meet his family and see some of his collection. Pohrt recalls a pair of Cheyenne moccasins, and how Chandler played a Winnebago flute, sang two Indian songs, and explained how he made kinnikinnick, "an aromatic mixture of commercial tobacco and, in that instance, the inner bark of silky cornel, a species of dogwood commonly referred to as red willow." Chandler gives Pohrt "a catlinite pipe bowl and a small Blackfeet beaded pouch. It had been a wonderful evening and I was completely captivated by the man."

Chandler, Pohrt learns, had for years been traveling all over the Midwest and West, meeting Native Americans. Chicago, where he'd lived, "proved to be an ideal location for his activities, for most of the Indians he visited lived within a short train ride. While actively engaged with his engine company, he would travel into Wisconsin on the weekends. . . . If the performance capabilities of an engine or carburetor needed to be road tested for two or three days, he would route the trip through a particular reservation or Indian community." Pohrt, when he gets to be a little older, also goes out to meet the Native Americans. In the early 1930s he drives to Montana with a friend, where they look for work and get to know the people on the reservations. He recalls how "we hiked in the mountains and went to an occasional movie or dance at Bill Kearn's social club on our time off. We especially enjoyed the dances, since they gave us an opportunity to meet Indians our own age."

This memoir of Pohrt's brings a whole

1 "Art of the American Indian Frontier: The Chandler-Pohrt Collection" opened at the National Gallery of Art on May 24, 1992, and is on view through January 24, 1993. The show will travel to the Seattle Art Museum (March 11-May 9, 1993), the Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming (June 19-September 12, 1993), and the Detroit Institute of Arts (October 15, 1993-February 6, 1994). The catalogue, edited by David W. Penney, is published by the Detroit Institute of Arts/University of Washington Press (368 pages, $60; $32 paper).

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period to life. It describes a Midwest where cultural differences have not yet been entirely erased. The collectors and adventurers and entrepreneurs who fill these pages are determined individualists. And the collections that Chandler and Pohrt put together and ultimately joined together somehow reflect both the pragmatism and the romanticism of those times. (The collection is now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, where David Penney, who organized the current exhibition, is a curator.) Yet the magical atmosphere of Pohrt's memoir is something that doesn't come through at all in the exhibition that's at the National Gallery. The installation in Washington is so somber and sterile, the works included look like specimens preserved in formaldehyde. Some headdresses stand on poles in a giant plastic case, and they look utterly forlorn. What is a headdress without a head? What is an exhibition without a soul?

This show is, of course, meant to be an occasion for hallelujahs, for it brings works created by Native Americans into our National Gallery of Art. What is being presented are objects produced, obviously with a great deal of care, by Native Americans of the Midwest and Plains States, mostly in the late nineteenth century. Many of the works included, perhaps the majority in terms of the space that they take up, are items of clothing. There are headdresses, moccasins, robes, leggings, sashes, shoulder bags. There are also blankets and bowls and pipes and spoons and clubs. A good deal of the work is decorated with beadwork and quillwork, so that various kinds of brilliant pointillist arabesques become motifs that run through much of the show. These objects could add up to at least a partial picture of the visual culture of late-nineteenth-century Native Americans, yet this is not what happens here. The objects are presented one by one, in a grimly reverent manner, so that it's difficult to experience them as elements that add up to a whole. The organizers have approached the project with an absolute respect for each moccasin, each piece of beadwork, and I see no point in questioning the seriousness of the organizers' intentions. It's just that they've given very little thought to how these objects will actually look in the chilly interiors of the National Gallery's ultramodern East Wing.

To my mind the objects that look best are some of the pipes, particularly a Pawnee pipe bowl, carved in catlinite in Nebraska, probably in the 1830s. The red stone (named after the nineteenth-century American painter George Catlin, who specialized in depictions of Indian life) has an attractive, warm-feeling surface. This pipe bowl is carved in the shape of a human head; the features are gravely simplified, the planes of the face have a dry elegance. It's a striking little piece of sculpture. The artist has anthropomorphized the pipe shape brilliantly; there's some magic in the way the pipe stem makes a ninety-degree turn and is suddenly a man's neck. It is one of the objects in the show that most closely approach what we think of as museum art (that is, painting and sculpture); and perhaps this is part of why it fits easily in the museum context.

As for the clothing that dominates the show, it is probably the hardest thing to present effectively in an art museum. It is not just a question of the decorative arts versus what we call high art. Furniture and china often do manage to hold their own in an art museum. The problem with clothing—a problem recognized by just about every museum in the world—is that we are not really seeing it until we see it on a body, so when it hangs by itself it feels, no matter how beautifully crafted, no matter how extraordinarily inventive its designs, lifeless, incomplete. In this show moccasins, leggings, coats are presented as individual works of art, when of course they are nothing if they are not an ensemble—an ensemble that clothes a person. The curators are asking these objects to have a free-standing authority that they were never meant to have. No wonder, then, that they for the most part look dully symmetrical, repetitive in their patterns and their geometries. What is lost here is the sense of movement and

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dimensionality that a body gives to clothing. The exhibition is obviously intended to tell us that these are more than pieces of clothing. One section of a catalogue essay is titled "Artifacts into Art"—and that is the transformation that we're supposed to witness in the show. The organizers may imagine that by isolating pieces of clothing they are showing us that these garments are solutions to formal problems. But of course the formal problems that these Native Americans were concerned with were the problems involved in decorating a clothed human body, so to consider the clothing in isolation is really to deny whatever formal intelligence these people had. (The catalogue does present an essay on "Expressions of Ethnicity: Nineteenth-Century Dress," but the installations of the show encourage a strictly formalist approach.)

Art museums, which were invented to house paintings and sculptures, have in the past fifty years become home to all kinds of things. The National Gallery holds more to the old concept of a picture gallery than most museums in this country, but it keeps a close eye on its only serious rival, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is by now an everything-under-one-roof institution, a gigantic version of the old cabinet of curiosities, with the curiosities now including postmodern chairs. Since the museum is itself an odd invention, a gathering together of objects often originally intended for specific non-museum purposes, it would be absurd to say that there is some point at which the evolution of the museum's contents must stop. But it is nonetheless true that there are things that fit better or worse into a particular museum or kind of museum. What fits where and how well and who decides: these are questions that we have a right to expect curators to answer.

A show such as "Art of the American Indian Frontier" is the end result of a process that began in the early twentieth century when artists and their friends began to look at ethnographic specimens and judge them as singular works of art. In 1910, to look at a mask and say, "This is a sculpture," was a radical act. Eighty years later, the same act can be rather banal. The questions of viewpoint and sensibility that go into all these judgments are very complicated, and a museum that presents every bit of material culture as a masterpiece isn't doing its job. The museum—especially a museum like the National Gallery—is such an overwhelming context that it can bludgeon the things it means to celebrate. I don't think that many of the 150-odd objects included in the "Art of the American Indian Frontier" are significant works of art, but even the few that are seem diminished. If we are going to approach these objects with expectations different from those of the people who created them, then the museum has to acknowledge that difference—delicately.

Walking through this show, I felt nostalgic for the old ethnographic presentations of Native American culture, in which clothing and utensils and weapons were gathered together, sometimes jumbled together, in huge displays. Some will say that those old exhibits—the kind still on view at New York's Museum of the American Indian—were insensitive, but I'm not so sure. By pulling all the elements of a culture together, those displays gave the sense of a total culture; they allowed us to uncover the aesthetic dimension within that totality. Those old displays didn't lead us by the nose; they left us to our own devices, and we looked and looked and looked. It is probably not possible to go back to that approach. If the National Gallery set out at this late date to imitate those old-fashioned ethnographic displays, the result would be self-conscious and retro—a postmodern riff on premodern museums. David Penney's catalogue essays deal straightforwardly with the need to merge the older ethnographic and newer aesthetic approaches. These essays are immensely interesting—they're the work of somebody who loves and respects the material. Penney's idea that art history will expand to "become a history of visual expression" works pretty well on the printed page, but in the galleries the new history fails to

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materialize. The problem is that an art museum is not a place where we go to study history. In an art museum we expect each work to contain its own imaginative life, and so we go through "Art of the American Indian Frontier" feeling painfully aware of the absence of that kind of imaginative life.

The presence of this exhibition at the National Gallery has, of course, something to do with Political Correctness. My hunch is that J. Carter Brown, the former director of the National Gallery who brought us the show, doesn't give a hoot about P.C. What he does care about is politics as usual, which now means filling certain P.C. quotas. I don't think there's anything wrong with a national institution feeling a need to address the creative powers of the people who were here first. Certainly it's as important as—possibly more important than—devoting an entire show to John Singer Sargent's mawkish Hispanomania, as the National Gallery saw fit to do this past summer. But the way that the "Art of the American Indian Frontier" has been arranged suggests problem-solving of a rather perfunctory kind. To treat every last moccasin as a masterpiece is in its own way a kind of dismissal. At the National Gallery the exhibition designers will light anything as if it were the Venus de Milo, which suggests that they are incapable of judging works on their individual merits. It is no doubt miraculous that the collections that Milford Chandler and Richard Pohrt assembled have made their way to the National Gallery. Pohrt has lived to see it, and considering all the trials that he and Chandler, two men of apparently modest means, went through along the way, he may be rubbing his eyes in amazement as he walks through this high-tech show. He may not even notice that all the history and mystery has been squeezed out of the collections. Chandler's and Pohrt's motives were no doubt far too complex to be conveyed in an exhibition; but something more ought to have come through. These men were enthusiasts of an entire culture. So far as you'd know from what you see at the National Gallery, they were trophy hunters.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Matisse at MOMA *by Hilton Kramer*
The new "Bartlett's Familiar Quotations" *by John Simon*
Evelyn Waugh: the later years *by Brooke Allen*
The fiction of Wendell Berry *by Bruce Bawer*
Edmund Burke *by Harvey Mansfield*
The lost New York of Joseph Mitchell *by Christopher Carduff*
Ariane Mnouchkine in Brooklyn *by Donald Lyons*
Chagall at the Guggenheim *by Jed Perl*
The shorter Mark Twain *by James W. Tuttleton*

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Books

Art after Warhol

by Karen Wilkin

Arthur Danto perplexes me. He is clearly possessed of a sharp intelligence, a lively, engaging mind, a fine sense of logic, and a lavish store of knowledge. He has the good philosopher's habit of refusing to accept even the most innocuous of assumptions, preferring to probe ideas from all directions, testing their accuracy by turning them upside down and inside out. To his dinner partners, Danto is probably an ideal companion; to his philosophy students at Columbia he is probably a delight. But to most of us, Danto is principally the art writer for *The Nation*. And for me, at least, that's where the perplexity arises, because with all his gifts, Danto seems to have no faith in what can be gleaned from seeing.

Danto's reviews of current exhibitions are an infuriating mixture of erudite observations, penetrating insights, and truly stunning wrong-headedness. What they lack is a sense of the potency of the visual, a conviction that painting and sculpture can disturb, exhilarate, provoke, seduce, and all the rest of it, without recourse to the verbal. Every once in a while, there's a first-rate piece—his discussion of Anselm Kiefer's 1989 retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, for example—but it is usually provoked by art, such as Kiefer's, that comes fully buttressed with explicit literary content. In the Kiefer article, Danto homed in on the rhetoric employed by the artist and his fans to demonstrate his cosmic importance and intense seriousness. He explored the gap between Kiefer's stated ideology and his art, mercilessly tracking faults in reasoning and fact. The intellectual basis of Kiefer's work, Danto concluded, was poorly conceived and meretriciously articulated, hence the paintings were unsatisfying and inadequate.

But the perception of art, for Danto, is evidently a purely intellectual exercise, and Kiefer's work, whatever its shortcomings, adheres to Danto's conception of what painting can (or ought to) be. Art apparently devoid of explicit literary content that addresses the eye first and foremost, and does not lend itself easily to verbal explication, is more resistant to his critical apparatus. Confronted by work of this nature, Danto's unwavering logic can drive him to peculiar conclusions: witness his review of the 1986 retrospective of the paintings of Morris Louis at MOMA.

The Louis exhibition unmanned Danto. He found Louis's pictures to be beautiful and arresting—almost against his inclination, it seemed—and was deeply suspicious of his reaction. To reassure himself, he constructed a curious hypothesis: since Louis's paintings spoke to him, they could not be as "purely" abstract, as wordless, nor as much for the eye and about seeing as everyone who had written about them seemed to think. If Louis's paintings engaged Danto's attention, that was evidence that they must really or even secretly be about identifiable, *nameable* images. The fault of what he calls "the standard critical theories" about Louis

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was their failure to take this into account. "These theories are typified in the catalogue that accompanies the exhibition," Danto wrote, noting "the absolute distance between the catalogue by John Elderfield and the exhibition he has curated." But after detailing what he saw as the inadequacy of Elderfield's comments, and complaining bitterly about Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's rigorously formal analyses, what did Danto offer as an alternative reading? Stirred by Louis's mysterious *Veils* with their sliding layers of color and the stubborn *Unfurleds* with their emptied-out centers and framing cascades of primary hues, Danto wrote: "at their best and greatest they evoke experiences like massed flowers or sunsets." The most interesting part of the article was its last paragraph. Acknowledging that this reference to flowers and sunsets might be less than wholly satisfying, Danto continued:

> It will be a while before we can say what these paintings are, but without our knowing very much at all, this is a greatly enjoyable show. Louis has confronted us with a module in the sphere of art, and the meaning of interpretation must be rethought against his marvelous achievement. That is the importance of the show. The importance of the work lies elsewhere. Wherever it lies, it is work that transcends its materials more than succumbs to them, and yields the kind of pleasure symphonic music affords.

With music, symphonic or otherwise, it is generally assumed that what enters the ear addresses the entire being—intellect and emotions, conscious and unconscious alike. (Music that does this without a specific narrative or literary basis, in fact, is held in higher esteem than program music that purports to illustrate particular ideas.) Yet art, which like love according to Yeats "comes in at the eye," is not automatically reckoned to have music's power of reaching every aspect of the viewer, unless it is bolstered by a more or less recognizable allusion or, recently, equipped with an integrated or accompanying text; abstract painting, for all its likeness to music, the most disembodied of the arts, can still raise doubts after eight decades. Does Danto's assertion that Louis's work demands that "the meaning of interpretation must be rethought" suggest that he believes, after all, in the ability of the "purely" visual to call upon our deepest feelings and most profound thoughts? Not at all. In *Beyond the Brillo Box*,[1] Danto pursues an argument that he began in 1964 with his influential article "The Artworld" and that he continued in 1981 with *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The philosophical impetus for Danto's argument is the effort to come up with a definition of art that can accommodate the modernist and postmodernist novelties of Duchamp, Warhol, and others; the result is a theory of art in which "merely" looking at works of art takes a back seat to philosophizing about them and in which the aesthetic dimension of art is short-changed in the name of definition.

Danto's thesis is roughly this: we are living in a post-modern, post-historical period of pluralism when anything is possible. Artists, because of this, have unprecedented freedom, liberated from historically determined limits of style, material, source, reference, or method. It is no longer possible, according to Danto, to distinguish good art from bad art *merely by looking*. It is not even possible, *merely by looking*, to distinguish art from non-art. Not being able to tell good art from bad does not trouble Danto particularly, even though we might assume that making this distinction is an essential function of the critic. Danto happily abdicates the role of critic in order to concentrate on the difference between art and "mere real things." "The boundary between art and the rest of reality is . . . philosophically inflexible," he writes, and determining that boundary is his paramount concern; other distinctions interest him less: "philosophy can only discriminate between

1 *Beyond the Brillo Box: The Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective*, by Arthur C. Danto; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 263 pages, $25.

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works of art and mere real things; it cannot discriminate among works of art, all of which must fit its theories if the theories are any good."

"To be a work of art," Danto writes, "is to embody a thought, to have a content, to express a meaning." But content and meaning, as we have long been aware from his reviews, are intimately linked with the word, or with ideas that can readily be formulated in words. In discussing Claes Oldenburg, an artist he admires, Danto writes: "Oldenburg had wit, a sense of comedy, a rowdy irreverence, and an acute metaphorical intelligence . . . Oldenburg perceived identities in opposites, he was the great discoverer of natural metaphors." Let's grant that Danto is sensitive to the fact that these are *visual* metaphors, since he credits Oldenburg with having "seen the resemblances between a Venetian gondola and a Swiss army knife, with lots of silver oars like the extra blades the knife bristles with." Yet this very comparison should make us question Danto's visual acuity, since a gondola is propelled not by "lots of silver oars," but by a single oar worked from the stern. The rest of Danto's discussion reverts to the word; he praises Oldenburg for having taken "his vocabulary from the commercial lexicon of American oversell—'Gigantic,' 'Super,' 'Crazy,' 'Wild,' . . ."

For Danto, wordlessness usually equals lack of excellence. He mentions admiring abstractions "by Reed, by Mangold, by Rockburne, by Scully, by Meyer—above all by Diebenkorn and by Motherwell—which convey meanings of which only paint is capable." But his response to Andy Warhol is more typical. Although he is slightly puzzled by the late pictures, he is generally taken by Warhol's conflation of commercial logos and sacred icons: "It is an inspired idea to see in the stylized dove with which Dove soap is imprinted a symbol of the Holy Spirit (as it is an inspiration to see soap itself, that paradigm cleansing agent, as the emblem of purification, of wiping out the stain of sin)." Other works in the series trouble Danto: "I can do nothing with the enlarged price tags of the discount store—59¢—or the even more puzzling $6.99 in the upper-left hand corner of *Raphael I—$6.99* of 1985. What costs $6.99? *Perhaps these last paintings are failures of some sort.*" (Italics mine.) No specific verbal association; no good. Given this logic, it's hard to imagine how Danto would judge the agonizing spatial quest manifest in Cézanne's work, or the complex visual analogies, the assonances and dissonances of shape and color, the purely visual tensions that Matisse's or Chardin's art depends on, excruciating to describe in words but apprehended readily through the eye.

Danto is noticeably immune to the expressiveness of the physical aspects of painting and sculpture. (He is fairly immune to sculpture, in general, perhaps because it is inherently more physical than painting, more unequivocally *there*.) The work that Danto responds to most strongly, which includes Oldenburg's, Warhol's, and Mark Tansey's painstakingly executed art-historical cartoons, appeals to him because it provides fodder for his efforts to propound a plausible definition of art. He is quick to point out that, enthralled as he is by Warhol's *Brillo Box*, what interests him is how the facsimile box, an object apparently indistinguishable from other "mere real things" of its type, provokes a train of thought in the viewer that declares the box to be art.

The question of how art declares itself as art—or, rather, how we decide that something *is* art—is challenging. It involves, among other things, issues of interpretation, perception, meaning, the nature of uniqueness, the significance of context, the difference between symbol and metaphor. For the most part, Danto's examination of such complex problems is grounded in concrete examples, the sort of graphic, memorable illustrations that capture the imagination. But these examples are usually elaborate constructions that have nothing to do with actual works of art. Questions of meaning and symbolism are tied to a description of a nightmarishly messy room and what it does

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or does not tell us about its inhabitant, while issues of context and perception require the invention of two hypothetical tribes who produce apparently identical artifacts with wholly different significance and utility. Following Danto's precise reasoning can be enormously stimulating, rather like doing vigorous physical exercise. He disrupts habitual patterns of thought, poses unexpected questions, and generally makes you reconsider even cherished positions. The trouble is, none of it really illuminates even the relatively few specific works of art that Danto permits himself to discuss. The concept, rather than the art object, predominates.

That Danto values concepts more highly than the actual presence of the work of art is manifest in his repeated declaration that Modernism begins not with Manet—nor, as some recent writers would have it, with Courbet—but with the Post-Impressionists. This is a view only slightly removed from diehard creationist theories that give precise (and recent) dates for the origin of the Earth and of life itself. "Modernism," writes Danto, "in my view, begins in the mid-1880s with Van Gogh and Gauguin, who repudiated the entirety of their own artistic pasts and sought their influences elsewhere, in Japan or Egypt or Polynesia." Never mind that Van Gogh was as influenced by French popular religious prints as he was by ukiyo-e, or that he made paintings based on Delacroix and Millet, arguing that no one insisted that musicians compose all the works they performed and demanding the same privilege for painters. Courbet and Manet, whose radical modernity was embodied more powerfully by how they painted than by any theoretical basis, are, in Danto's view, less modern than Van Gogh and Gauguin because they saw themselves as the inheritors of a long tradition, albeit one debased in their own times and in need of revitalizing. The evidence of Courbet's and Manet's painterly innovations—subversive subject matter, non-academic drawing, unprecedentedly disruptive paint-handling—apparently counts for little. What counts even less, for Danto, is that it was precisely those painterly innovations that fascinated Van Gogh and Gauguin, and determined the course of their art. Danto's notion that the work of these artists constituted a definitive break with "the entirety of their own artistic pasts" is simply not true, in terms of the lineage of Modernism. (It is worth noting, too, that the painters who Danto believes are synonymous with the advent of Modernism are also the first whose personalities—Warhol-style—seem to have had more impact on modern-day viewers than their art has; people unsure of what any Van Gogh looks like, other than *Sunflowers*, know the story of his ear.)

There is, of course, nothing new about regarding art as concept to the virtual exclusion of its other properties. That is Duchamp's legacy. Danto's approach signals the academicization of Duchamp's playful nose-thumbing. Nor is there anything unusual, these days, about Danto's refusal to trust what he sees, his preference for extricating subtexts or "decoding" hidden messages, or his persistence in treating art as information, instead of coming to terms with art objects as physical, *made* things charged with the emotional and intellectual baggage of their makers. A perceptive colleague has pointed out that our willingness to accept Danto's kind of scholasticism as an appropriate, even superior, approach to art tells us more about ourselves than about the condition of painting or sculpture. But as my friends who are veterans of twelve-step programs are fond of saying: "You can't get oranges from a hardware store." As long as one expects nails and not orange juice, *Beyond the Brillo Box* is a provocative and absorbing book, certainly more so than most up-to-date commentaries of its kind, just as Danto's reviews are often more challenging and interesting than much else that's out there.

This is not to say that *Beyond the Brillo Box* can't be exasperating. Especially irritating is Danto's hipper-than-thou stance, his insistence that he is no hidebound formal aes-

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thete tied to outmoded notions of High Art and taste, the importance of the difference between art and non-art notwithstanding. (His paradigms of such regressive thinking are Clement Greenberg and Hilton Kramer.) Danto credits Pop Art with having transformed his vision of the world and rescuing him from the dangers of aestheticism. Congratulating himself on his broadmindedness, he describes how, while waiting for a lift at an intersection "in some American city," he admired the used car lots on two corners, with their fluttering pennants and raucous signs. "There was a huge self-service gas station on a third corner, and a supermarket on the fourth, with signs in the window announcing sales of Del Monte, Cheerios, Land O Lakes butter, Long Island ducklings, Velveeta, Sealtest, Chicken of the Sea. . . . Heavy trucks roared past . . . I was educated to hate all this. I would have found it intolerably crass and tacky when I was growing up an aesthete . . . But I thought, Good heavens. This is just remarkable!"

Danto's description immediately recalls Stuart Davis's famous catalogue of "things which have made me want to paint, outside of other paintings," a list that includes "skyscraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations, chainstore fronts, and taxi-cabs," as well as "electric signs . . . 5 & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio." Davis wrote this in 1943, without the benefit of the education Danto claims to have received from Pop Art. Perhaps more important, he wrote it even though he was a life-long champion of values that Danto would dismiss as those of an aesthete. For all his enthusiasm for the vernacular, Davis, unlike the Pop painters, regarded the artifacts and appearances of what would now be called "popular culture," not as ends in themselves, but as points of departure for his invention of a muscular, energetic American version of Cubism. Where Warhol and his colleagues used the motifs, imagery, and manner of commercial art more or less verbatim, Davis translated his intense perceptions of modern urban life into the language of High Art. Davis's literal use of words, letters, and dislocated phrases in his paintings might, of course, have endeared him to Danto, but since he did not review last year's Davis retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum, it seems unlikely.

Davis oddly anticipated his differences with Danto when he wrote, in 1940, "Art is never information; it is a direct event and an experience." Danto clearly takes more seriously art as information—art that lends itself to explication—than art that is "a direct event and experience"—art that addresses the intelligence and the emotions primarily through visual means. That's why, I suspect, Danto prefers Warhol's literal transcriptions of popular imagery to Davis's improvisations on similar themes. Who was it who said, "That's an explanation but not an excuse"?

Spaced out

Les Murray The Rabbiter's Bounty: Collected Poems.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 322 pages, $25

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral: A Novel Sequence.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 71 pages, $20

reviewed by Robert Richman

Les Murray is a fifty-four-year-old Australian poet whose work is fairly well known in this country. In this he is unusual: Australian poets, unlike Australian wines, are seldom thought worth importing. Murray's first U.S. volume, *The Vernacular Republic* (1982), contained a selection from his five previous books.[1] His next U.S. book, *The Daylight Moon* (1989), contained work from two subsequent volumes, *The People's Otherworld* (1983) and *The Daylight Moon* (1987).[2] *The Rabbiter's Bounty*, Murray's first

1 *The Ilex Tree* (1965), *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), *Poems against Economics* (1972), *Lunch and Counter Lunch* (1974), and *Ethnic Radio* (1977).

2 Both *The Vernacular Republic* and *The Daylight Moon* were published by Persea.

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"collected" on either side of the equator, contains work from all his books except *The Boys Who Stole The Funeral* (1980), the long sequence which has been reissued by Murray's new American publishers to accompany *The Rabbiter's Bounty*.

Australians have always been insecure about their literary culture. Where other former English colonies like Ireland and the United States have produced many writers of the first rank, few have emerged from Australia. To make matters worse, when major talents do appear—a Robert Hughes, say, or the poet Peter Porter—they typically reject the philistinism and isolation of their homeland and live elsewhere. Murray, who seems to be making a bid of his own for world-class rank, has lived his entire life in Australia, and is proud of it. He has chided exiles for contributing to the nation's low self-esteem. As he notes in *The Peasant Mandarin* (1978), an essay collection in which he makes his cranky nativism clear: "In a society abandoned as philistine by many of its finest talents, the community . . . may become slovenly and shamefaced at the very core of its life."

It irks Murray that Australian academics have been quick to embrace foreign trends like psychoanalysis, feminism, and Marxism. Murray thinks that such fads elevate third-rate writers, which they often do. Trouble is, Murray would like to banish all foreign culture. A main source of anger is the continuing dominance, down under, of the English cultural tradition. Indeed, in some of the *Peasant Mandarin* essays, Murray often sounds more like a biased multiculturalist than a dispassionate critic: "Formal education and high culture in Australia . . . are systems of foreign ideas imposed from above whose usual effect is to estrange people from their own culture." And: "As is proper in one of my ancestry, I have a large sympathy for civilizations which have been eclipsed or not given their due in history."

What Murray wants to install, in place of the derivative culture he seeks to evict, is an indigenous culture. "A struggle between the vernacular and the privileged cultures has been endemic in Australia for a very long time," writes Murray in another essay, and he hopes the former prevails. What he does not seem to understand, however, is that promoting a native culture means encouraging mediocrity. In his country, Murray contends, "foreign work is held to be *ipso facto* superior," and if you read him enough you would think this is due to a conspiracy rather than a frank appraisal of the facts.

Where is this highly regarded native culture? Not in the cities or college towns: they were long ago taken over by aesthetes and feminists. The home of Murray's anti-modern culture is the country, the backwater, the bush. For only in the outback can one, as Murray puts it in another essay, "gain a sense of the sacredness of the Australian continent and the living beings that inhabit it." In 1986 Murray moved from Sydney to a farm, and this fact is reported on book jackets and in "Extract from a Verse Letter to Dennis Haskell": "this choice I had: / get out of Yuppie City or go mad." Murray's pro-bush stance may even be deduced from his titles: "The Forest Hit by Modern Use," "Lament for the Country Soldiers," "Recourse to the Wilderness." "*The bush is sensible . . . it's—decent,*" a character remarks in *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, and Murray concurs, for there, as he says in "Troop Train Returning," "All things are spaced out . . . each in its value."

Living on unpillaged soil where things are properly "spaced out," and being able to commune with them at will, are for Murray keys to spiritual well-being. It comes as no surprise that he strives in his poems to emulate his beloved outback, for they obey what might be called an aesthetic of sprawl. (There is even a poem called "The Quality of Sprawl.") In Murray's poems, the celebration of the bush and its people is as unconstrained, unfettered, and open-ended as the Australian expanse itself.

With their democratic, all-encompassing reach, Murray's poems resemble those of his hero, Walt Whitman. And Murray, again like Whitman, frequently seems unable to put on the brakes:

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Flashy wrists out of buttoned grass cuffs,
feral whisky burning gravels,
jazzy knuckles ajitter on soakages, peaty
cupfuls, soft pots overflowing,
setting out along the great curve, migrating
mouse-quivering water,
mountain-driven winter water, in the high
tweed, stripping off its mountains
to run faster in its skin, it swallows the above,
it feeds where it is fed on,
it forms at many points and creases outwards,
pleated water
shaking out its bedding soil, increasing it scale,
beginning the headlong
—Bent Water, you could call this level
between droplet and planetary, not as steered
by twisting beds laterally
but as upped and swayed on its swelling and
outstanding own curvatures . . .
("Bent Water in the Tasmanian Highlands")

And so on, for another page and a half. White space is at a minimum on Murray's pages because this big-hearted poet is obliged to pack as much of the bush into his poems as he can. This is good in theory, unless your subject is mosquitoes, as in one section of the ten-page "Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle":

. . . the males feed on plant-stem fluid,
absorbing that watery ichor;
the females meter the air, feeling for the
warm-blooded smell, needing blood for
their eggs.
They find the dingo in his sleeping-place,
they find his underbelly and his anus;
they find the possum's face, they drift up the
ponderous pleats of the fig tree, way up
into its rigging,
the high camp of the fruit bats; they feed on
the membranes and ears of bats; tired wings
cuff air at them;
their eggs burning inside them, they alight
on the muzzles of cattle,
the half-wild bush cattle, there at the place of
the Sleeper Dump, at the place of the
Tallowwoods.
The males move about among growth tips;
ingesting solutions, they crouch intently . . .

Now and then Murray forgoes the undiscriminating torrent of praise, resists the impulse to fill every square inch of the page with words, and a happy calm rules. One such moment is in "The Widower in the Country":

I'll get up soon, and leave my bed unmade.
I'll go outside and split off kindling wood
from the yellow-box log that lies beside the
gate,
and the sun will be high, for I get up late now.

I'll drive my axe in the log and come back in
with my armful of wood, and pause to look
across
the Christmas paddocks aching in the heat,
the windless trees, the nettles in the yard . . .

Pared-down rhetoric and emotional directness also lend "Three Poems in Memory of My Mother, Miriam Murray née Arnall" their quality. The first poem, "Weights," only hints at the knowledge later revealed: that complications arising from Murray's birth were the cause not only of his mother's death, which came during the delivery of a later, still-born child, but also, before that, of a miscarriage:

Not owning a cart, my father
in the drought years was a bowing
green hut of cattle feed, moving,
or gasping under cream cans. No weight
would he let my mother carry.

Instead, she wielded handles
in the kitchen and dairy, singing often,
gave saucepan-boiled injections
with her ward-sister skill, nursed neighbours,
scorned gossips, ran committees.

She gave me her factual tone,
her facial bones, her will,
not her beautiful voice
but her straightness and her clarity.

I did not know back then
nor for many years what it was,
after me, she could not carry.

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One wishes that such writing was more common in *The Rabbiter's Bounty*. Far too often, Murray's obsessions are given center stage. Scarcely a page goes by without a paean to the wilderness, a knock at England, or a derisive sneer at the city. "I will follow cattle," he writes in "Walking to the Cattle Place": "an ancient tune . . . keeps me farming / rather than raping, or embalming, the land." And in "Sidere Men Eadem Mutato," he grouses that at his university "a major in English made one a minor Englishman . . ."

The Boys Who Stole the Funeral, which was written when Murray still lived in decadent Sydney, is an adieu to city values. The story revolves around two young men from Sydney, one unemployed and one a college drop-out, who steal from the city undertaker's the corpse of a friend to give it what his family could not afford to give it: a proper burial in his rural home. This improbable task takes the boys deep into the bush, where they meet and befriend one sage rustic after another. Eventually the boys get jobs as runners of illegally slaughtered beef—a blow to the Sydney business powers whose health regulations have imperiled small farmers. Evil modernity is represented not only by the unseen powers in Sydney, but also by one boy's father, who drives a Jaguar, wears white Levis, and has a feminist lover. The real point of *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* is how to cleanse the polluted modern self. Near the end, one boy is killed by a policeman whom he has assaulted—the cop stopped their car, rightly suspecting them to be the Sydney body-snatchers—but his friend escapes, only to submit himself to a ghastly aboriginal rite involving splitting his penis with flint. Eventually the survivor decides to stay, after being asked by a new friend to install a patent trellis. The pay? "*Three feeds a day*," says the friend, "*and help on your place when you need it* . . ."

As a verbal artifact, the poem is not without merit. The sprawl Murray relishes is almost entirely absent here, thanks to the series of sixteen-line, free verse "sonnets" that the poet confines himself to. One nice passage occurs after the shoot-out, when the surviving boy flees into the bush:

> The body has taken grief as guilt and flight
> and sought high country to be at bay. It has skirted
> roads and log dumps, stolen an axe, stared back at
> eyes in the dark, has shown them its steel grimace;
> it has hacked a snake on a log and remembered matches . . .

Spoiling things again, however, is the ubiquitous anti-modern, anti-city theme, which makes the story as predictable as a movie, and the language as aesthetically appealing, at times, as a computer print-out. At one point an irate farmer sings:

> *We fought with rabbits and with drought,*
> *we beat disease and flood*
> *but we couldn't fight the men in ties when they*
> *were out for blood.*
> *They made us buy milk quotas, then they*
> *knocked them in the head,*
> *They schemed to make us debtors and give*
> *middlemen our bread.*
>
> *Now a city man is growing tax concessions on*
> *our land,*
> *His daughters ride high horses where my mother's*
> *fruit trees stand;*
> *I'm too old to learn the modern views; I was even*
> *slow to see*
> *men I killed once in uniform were not my*
> *enemy.*

Two pages later, another farmer complains: "*we're meant to be replaced / by clerks doing agribusiness, farming without commitment, / without flavour, or love.*" Still later, a bush dweller laments that country folk must "[*c*]*heck with Sydney. For your car parts, / your seed, your teachers, your culture.* . . ." Early in the poem, a cormorant is admired because it is so ill-adapted to the modern world.

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"Only shits drive past," one of the boys snaps when his mate commits a mortal sin of the bush by passing a hitchhiker on the road. Again and again, we are asked to measure our flawed selves against the virtuous bush-dwellers and those in league with them.

"What you're not free to do," the surviving boy is told by a native who offers him a dish of commonality after his grim rite, "is to taste in theory; it has to be body and soul . . ." This touches on another problem with Murray's work. The poet's call to spurn modernity and metropolitan life is not, and never will be, fully embraced—"body and soul," as Murray puts it—by his readers. For whether he likes it or not, his readers are mainly urban intellectuals and university types who can only "taste in theory" his call to the bush. Despite Murray's brash anti-intellectualism and disavowal of "learned" poetic techniques like wit and allusion, these poems appeal mainly to a literary elite: Harold Bloom and Derek Walcott, not Crocodile Dundee, supply the blurbs for *The Rabbiter's Bounty*.

Yet listen to Murray: "The people have come to see *all* poets as being in collusion with intellectuals and other establishment types who despise the common herd." And: "All I knew is that if ever I snubbed or denied my fellow country people, those who hadn't had the education I was getting, I would be lost." This is the sheerest mummery. Murray's poems are as distant from the "country people" and "common herd" he exalts as those of T. S. Eliot and, yes, Walt Whitman.

Panpipes & preppies

Donna Tartt The Secret History. Knopf, 524 pages, $23

reviewed by Brooke Allen

For those who follow promotional hype in the literary world, Donna Tartt is the newest young star around. In the middle of a time of severe belt-tightening among publishing houses, she received a $450,000 advance (for a first novel) from Knopf, and Knopf's bold move was almost immediately justified by large foreign and film rights sales for the book, *The Secret History*. Touted by literary lights as diverse as Willie Morris and Bret Easton Ellis, Tartt has been hailed as a major talent, a classical, formal, "serious" novelist in an MTV world.

After having read *Vanity Fair*'s fulsome puff-piece ("Smart Tartt," September 1992), in which Tartt reveals herself as an accomplished, if not very subtle, self-promoter, I was eager to get my hands on the book itself. For it is true that erudition and formality have become increasingly rare and valuable attributes in the novel, and if Tartt were all that she and Knopf's publicists crack her up to be then we should be grateful for the advent of this new talent. Suspicions of pretentiousness, however, are inevitable (Tartt chats at length about her youthful precocity, classical scholarship, and wide learning), and they begin to be confirmed as early as the acknowledgments, for what is one to make of thanks "to Gary Fisketjon, *il miglior fabbro*"? It would be nice to give Tartt the benefit of the doubt and believe that she is simply making a joke, albeit an arcane one. But the identification with Eliot is no joke. References to him are inserted so conspicuously into the book that it's hard not to trip over them, and two of her characters—the narrator, Richard Papen, and another protagonist, Henry Winter—are Eliotic in conception. Tartt's self-identification with Eliot becomes, over the course of the book, obvious. She sees herself as an intellectual and a polymath, born, changeling-like, in a culturally benighted American wasteland (in Tartt's case Mississippi, where in a former life she was *outré* enough to pledge Kappa Kappa Gamma at Ole Miss); an Anglophile; a religious convert (Catholic to his Anglo-Catholic); a classical writer working in close accordance with a broad Western tradition. She even picks up Eliot's technique of inserting quotations into her work whole—an eye-catching trick,

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though somewhat less original than it was in Eliot's day.

The difference from Eliot, of course, is one of depth. While he worked his quotations and references fully into the fabric of his poetry, Tartt dots them around like cake decorations. It's the Woody Allen method of self-salesmanship: if you do enough assiduous intellectual name-dropping, people will finally believe you to be genuinely erudite. Not that Tartt hasn't read deeply and extensively; it's just that her love of learning seems that of an intellectual groupie, a young woman star-struck by writers and professors rather than by rock or movie stars. For in spite of the glitter and the fine (often genuinely fine) writing, *The Secret History* is an adolescent's book, with an adolescent's values and perceptions. And of course even an obsession with Eliot is an adolescent's obsession.

The Secret History takes place in Vermont, at an artistic, liberal, expensive institution called Hampden College (Tartt herself attended Bennington). The narrator, Richard Papen, arrives at Hampden as a transfer student. He is from Plano, California, a small silicon town in the desert that plainly symbolizes the spiritual and intellectual wasteland that typifies the contemporary world. Being neither rich nor preppie, he is an anomaly at Hampden, and does all he can to hide his ignominious middle-American roots and invent a Beverly Hills-style background for himself.

He would like to study ancient Greek. But Greek is taught by Julian Morrow, a Svengali figure only loosely connected with the rest of the college, and Julian insists that his students virtually withdraw from all other classes and study only with him. Richard is turned down by Morrow and languishes in isolation, observing the Classics students —the lucky few—from a distance. He becomes enamored of this bizarre group, and Tartt tries hard to convey their glamour.

> His students—if they were any mark of his tutelage—were imposing enough, and different as they all were they shared a certain coolness, a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world: they were magnificent creatures, such eyes, such hands, such looks—*sic oculos, sic ille manus, sic ora ferebat.*

Eventually, by a tricky demonstration of his knowledge of Greek syntax, Richard infiltrates the group and gets accepted to Julian's classes. The Greek students become his friends: Henry Winter, the leader of the group, tall, imposing, ascetic, learned in any number of Near Eastern languages; Francis Abernathy, hypochondriac, neurotic, homosexual; Edmund (Bunny) Corcoran, a none-too-bright, noisy, obnoxious preppie, hideously brought up by Connecticut parents verging on the lunatic; the twins, Charles and Camilla Macaulay—Charles, a golden youth headed swiftly toward dipsomania, and Camilla, Richard's ostensible love-interest, a beautiful but rather characterless creature. The group as a whole forms a rogue's gallery of stereotypical East Coast WASPs; Richard is hypnotized by their patina and by their affected demeanor.

> "We could play bezique, or euchre if you'd rather," [Henry] said, the blue and gold [of playing cards] dissolving from his hands in a blur. "I like poker myself—of course, it's rather a vulgar game, and no fun at all with two—but still, there's a certain random element in it which appeals to me."

This kind of talk bedazzles the provincial, twenty-year-old Richard, but the reader is less likely to be charmed by these self-conscious examples of *jeunesse dorée*. Large portions of the book thus become tedious at best, since these, for better or worse, make up our cast of characters.

As Richard gets more and more involved with his new friends, he realizes that they seem to be hiding something from him: there is much to-ing and fro-ing during the night, muddy sheets in the laundry, and other tell-tale signs of secret activity. It is not until he catches them all (with the excep-

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tion of Bunny) in a foiled attempt at flight to South America that he discovers the truth. Henry, Francis, and the twins, encouraged by Julian, have for some months been trying to conduct a Bacchanal—a real one, involving consciousness-altering, hallucinations, and unspecified sexual acts. They finally succeed; but when they come to their senses they find that they have inadvertently killed a farmer who happened onto their ceremony. An elaborate cover-up follows, involving, eventually, a second murder, that of the hapless Bunny. The rest of the book involves the ramifications of the crimes, the group's remorse, and its ultimate break-up.

Tartt is lavish with intricate, well-observed detail, especially when treating the core group of characters, Julian Morrow and his *crème de la crème*. In spite of this, these characters remain as dead as mutton. Julian, for example, the cosmopolitan sophisticate, intimate of George Orwell and Harold Acton, is repeatedly described as witty, elegant, utterly charming; Tartt never succeeds, however, in making him sound anything but ridiculously fruity.

> "Poor Charles," he said. "It's not *serious*, is it? . . . Is he allowed any visitors? I shall, regardless, telephone him this afternoon. Can you think of anything he might like? Food is so dreadful in the hospital. I remember years ago, in New York, when a dear friend of mine was in Columbia Presbyterian—in the bloody Harkness Pavilion, for goodness' sake—the chef at the old Le Chasseur used to send her dinner to her every single day. . . ."

The entire group speaks in the phony accents of characters from a Hollywood "society" film of the Thirties. This jars with the narrator's flowery, heavily elegiac tone and with the rather more realistic and better-realized subsidiary characters. While Tartt would clearly like the doomed group to take center stage, the lesser, comical sidekicks often usurp that position.

For Tartt has an unexpected, underutilized gift for comedy, and the only parts of *The Secret History* that come to life are those in which she lets herself roll on the minor characters: Judy Poovey, Richard's scorned neighbor in the dorm; Cloke Rayburn, the college drug dealer; Bunny's terrible parents. The longish section on Bunny's funeral is the best in the book. Here, for example, the parents check out Bunny's "floral tributes":

> Mrs. Corcoran began to inspect the ferns, lifting up the fronds to check for dead foliage, making notes on the back of the envelopes with a tiny silver screw-point pencil. To her husband she said: "Did you see that wreath the Bartles sent?"
>
> "Wasn't that nice of them."
>
> "No, in fact I don't think it appropriate for an employee to send something like that. I wonder, is Bob thinking about asking you for a raise?"
>
> "Now, hon."
>
> "I can't believe these plants, either," she said, jabbing a forefinger into the soil. "This African violet is almost dead. Louise would be humiliated if she knew."
>
> "It's the thought that counts."
>
> "I know, but still, if I've learned one thing from this it is never to order flowers from Sunset Florists again. All the things from Tina's Flowerland are so much nicer. . . ."

The Corcorans in their dreadfulness are far more alive than any of the central characters into whom so much of the author's emotions have been invested, and scenes like this are of great value within the lengthy, diffuse narrative. Compared with the superbly observed Corcoran scenes, the more emotional ones fall horribly flat. This problem is evident in the attempted descriptions of Camilla's beauty, in which Tartt has always to resort to hokey clichés: ". . . she seemed not at all her bright unattainable self but rather a hazy and ineffably tender apparition, all slender wrists and shadows and disordered hair, the Camilla who resided, dim and lovely, in the gloomy boudoir of my dreams."

The scenes of astringent comedy, it will

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be evident, come as a welcome relief. But like so many only half-good writers, Tartt's sense of comedic nuance is inextricably connected to her sense of scorn. Her best characters are her funny ones, but she can only be funny about people who are beyond the pale in some sense.

And the sense tends to be a social rather than a moral one. For *The Secret History*'s claim to be a morally centered novel is in fact spurious; the author's exhaustive exploration of guilt, the narrator's wallowing in remorse, ring false throughout. "It's a terrible thing, what we did," states Francis after the Vermont farmer's death; "I mean, this man was not *Voltaire* we killed. But still. It's a shame. I feel bad about it." Now is the reader supposed to feel bad for these selfish, affected children? Yes, apparently: more so than for the farmer, since the students are golden youths who should have had great futures before them, the farmer only a farmer—"not Voltaire." Francis's statement is the more repellent in that the author does not really intend it to be so; the reader is supposed tacitly to share Francis's assumptions, and the group's scorn for *hoi polloi* is subtly approved by Tartt. This is a snobbish book above all, and though its heroes sin gravely they are beautiful and brilliant and therefore not damned; the damned are those who sin socially, whose veneer is grossly flawed—the idiotic Bunny; his crude parents; the other Hampden students, beer-swilling and coke-snorting their way through college.

In spite of everything that is wrong with this book, I do not want to give the impression that Tartt is without talent as a writer. Her faults are those of youth (though at almost thirty she should be old enough to have outgrown them): romanticism, snobbishness, overwriting. She is also too ambitious, frequently writing beyond what her skills will allow. She has overreached herself, for example, in choosing to employ a male narrator; as a result, and in spite of obvious efforts from the author, Richard is curiously sexless, and his conversations with other men ring false—for Tartt, unlike Jane Austen, dares to portray men talking outside the company of women. The tired device of using a narrator who is essentially an outsider, an observer, deprives the story of much of its immediacy. Tartt's heavily descriptive, ornamental style reflects the worst rather than the best of the Southern literary tradition; her themes and attitudes are juvenile. Yet, in spurts and odd moments, she displays a genuine gift for observation and for sly humor. It is to be hoped that she continues to develop this, rather than the more baroque vein so much in evidence in *The Secret History*.

Books into life

Christopher Benfey
The Double Life of Stephen Crane.
Knopf, 294 pages, $25

reviewed by Guy Davenport

In 1925 Thomas Beer's *Stephen Crane*, along with Wilson Follett's twelve-volume *The Work* [*sic*] *of Stephen Crane* (1925-26), fixed Crane securely in the American canon. There had been a biography in 1923, by Thomas L. Raymond. Follett's collected works had prefaces to individual volumes by Willa Cather (who met the young Crane in a Nebraska newspaper office), Carl Van Doren, Amy Lowell, and Henry Mencken. Beer's charming biography had for an introduction a thirty-three-page essay by Joseph Conrad. Crane figures in the reminiscences of H. G. Wells and Ford Madox Ford, among others. No American student can get through high school or college without being assigned *The Red Badge of Courage* at least twice; and "The Open Boat," "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," and "The Blue Hotel" are standard stories in anthologies. The Library of America *Stephen Crane: Prose and Poetry* (1984, and now in its third printing), edited by J. C. Levenson, contains just over a hundred pieces. Crane was twenty-nine when he died in the Black Forest in Germany, in 1900, of tuberculosis.

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Thomas Beer's biography, a companion to his *The Mauve Decade*, is as readable as Lytton Strachey, the influence of whose style, sense of fun, and irony is obvious, and as lively as Mencken. Beer's Crane is a kind of Penrod who evolves into one of O. Henry's fly young men who have come to New York from the sticks eager for the romance of real life. And with an O. Henryish flair for doing the unexpected, he wrote *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* in a Syracuse frat house before he had ever seen the Bowery. He wrote *The Red Badge* with such convincing detail that a veteran of the War bragged of knowing him at Antietam. (Several of Whitman's most graphic poems about soldiers and their suffering were written a decade before the War, and neither Beer nor his latest biographer, Chistopher Benfey, recalls Daniel Defoe, the arch counterfeiter, whose way with fiction is exactly Crane's.) Benfey is good at spotting these reflections of life in art: "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" encodes the awkwardness of Crane's mistress (passing as his wife) Cora, formerly madam of the Hotel de Dream whorehouse in Jacksonville, Florida, being introduced to her new neighbors in England, among whom was Henry James (who liked her).

But as soon as we open Professor Benfey's *The Double Life of Stephen Crane* we are told that Beer's is a work of fiction based on forged letters and coming from a hyperactive imagination. Scholarship has recently snatched away from us the friendship of Picasso and Alfred Jarry (it turns out that they never met). Beer's biography, to my eye, is not all that inaccurate or misleading. If biography is a literary art (as Plutarch, at its inception, thought it was, and has suffered damnably at the hands of nit-picking German pedants), then I still prefer Beer's biography as reading matter, while giving Benfey fullest credit for his diligence in research and interpretation of the texts.

It's best to think of Beer as an early biographer who did not have Benfey's advantages. He might have known that the young reporter who covered Crane's burial service in New Jersey was named Wallace Stevens, but then the name would have meant nothing to him in 1925. What Benfey has done is fill in large blanks in Beer.

Even so, Benfey has hard going of it in finding Crane, and in establishing a plot for his life. Lives do not have plots, only biographies do. And practically all of Crane's wildly active life—on battlefields in Greece and Cuba, in New York courtrooms and Greenwich Village studios—has only Crane as its witness. What novelist would have his hero leave the Spanish-American War, nip up to a sanatorium in Tennessee, and then nip back to Cuba? Only a comic novelist —an Alphonse Daudet—would have his hero set out for Cuba in the first place, end up in Greece, and then, after a frantic afternoon in London with Conrad trying to raise travel funds, get to Cuba after all? Who, but the most confused and impractical of people, would set out from England (Cora thought it was the thing to do) when Crane was more than half dead, to cross the Channel in raging weather, and proceed on a litter to Germany, where Crane died almost immediately?

The "double life" of Professor Benfey's title refers to the fact that Crane's writing anticipated so much of what he later did: the reality came after the fiction. He wanted to see if "he got it right." He authenticated the battle scenes in *The Red Badge* by observing Greeks and Turks. He authenticated Henry Fleming's experience in battle at San Juan Hill.

Perhaps biography is, after all, a nuisance. A writer's life must have *something* to do with what he wrote. Shakespeare is an absolute denial of this. Edgar Johnson's magnificent two volumes of Walter Scott's life add nothing whatever to our understanding or enjoyment of Scott's poetry or fiction. Richard Ellmann was so determined to get Joyce and his writing in sync that he concocted a curiously inaccurate biography as well as an imaginary work by Joyce (which he called *Giacomo Joyce*—it's simply one of Joyce's many notebooks on the front of

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which he whimsically wrote his name in Italian).

Curiosity is curiosity, and biography is a cultural ritual. Plutarch wrote his exemplary lives as a moralist and philosopher. Biographies are now written by journalists, professors, and surviving kin. Psychology has replaced philosophy, and the achievement (or sins) of the subject is the reason a biography gets written.

Benfey makes a great deal of Crane's childhood, despite a paucity of information. Beer treats the parents—a Methodist minister, the father, a YMCA temperance-tract writer and orator, the mother—adequately; Benfey read their Methodist treatises and makes a convincing case for Crane's growing up in a family that wrote, and thus became a writer. But the toddler Crane who played at writing (he was the fourteenth child and had seen lots of homework) and asked "How do you spell O?" sounds like a more plausible beginning: writing is a thing to do.

Stephen Crane is an intractable subject because so much of his emotional life is an impenetrable surface. Benfey has hard weather of it with the love affairs, and even with Cora, who remains a blur. Only Conrad's account of knowing Crane (the preface to Beer's biography) gives us any sense of what the man was like, and Conrad's words are so finely nuanced, so ironically reserved, and so obviously shaped for effect, as to be a Conrad story, a kind of "Secret Sharer" in a different key. One hopes that Max Beerbohm was tempted to make a drawing of Conrad telling Crane, all of a long evening, Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*. What other writer would have asked to have it told, and what other writer would have obligingly told it?

Crane's writing is more than we are aware of, and very uneven. The poems are disconcertingly mystical, the stories about babies are an imaginative truancy. Genius is sometimes very strange. Crane's best works were bolts of genius, unplanned, and quickly written, never revised. In a sense, he did not live beyond his adolescence as a writer. His identity was invented and shaped right until our time by Conrad and Ford, for whom he was the Impressionist. This metaphor from painting obscures the fact that Crane's painterly analogues are Winslow Homer and John Sloan. We had a real Impressionist in Lafcadio Hearn, of whom Conrad and Crane may have been vaguely aware. What they were really admiring was a perfection of narrative skill. We *experience* "The Open Boat." Crane and Conrad together changed the act of reading. We experience *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* Tolstoy we watch; Balzac we listen to; Joyce we follow. Crane at his best gets under our skin and stays there. We go through his imagined experiences with him. How he does it we have no science of knowing.

There's nothing extraordinary about Crane's prose, in itself. His words are simple. His images have been praised for their startling originality. O. Henry had a better ear for dialogue. The clue, I think, is in his attack. "None of them knew the color of the sky" became for Conrad and his circle as magic a sentence as the last one of Flaubert's "Hérodias." *Maggie* begins with a rock fight among children, *The Red Badge* with lifting fog that discloses a bivouac. This abruptness is the first step in a masterly timing. It is Crane's pace that distinguishes him. It varies from an amble to a quick-step, but it is always brisk. He was a superb director of action. He is never retrograde, like Conrad, or diffuse, like James. He has the clarity of a comic-strip, and a comic-strip's coloring (red, yellow, blue, black, white—his palette is as distinctive as his narrative pace).

Benfey's Crane is hard-won from new research and from a great deal of original insight, especially among patterns (things in a row, psychological undercurrents), and his biography is a worthy and welcome contribution to Crane studies; yet Crane as a person is at a greater distance from us in Benfey's pages than in Beer's, which in turn place Crane at a greater distance than Conrad's thirty pages. And the essence of Crane may be in a few lines of Ford, who says (probably lying) that Crane once demonstrated precision in writing by pinning an ace of spades

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to his study wall and, from the opposite doorway, putting a bullet from his revolver through the center of it.

Beyond the bandstand

Stuart Feder Charles Ives:
"My Father's Song."
A Psychoanalytic Biography.
Yale University Press, 396 pages, $35

reviewed by Richard Brookhiser

Charles Ives: "My Father's Song," a study of the Connecticut Yankee who was part-genius, part-crank, and perhaps the non-popular American musician of the twentieth century most worth listening to, is subtitled "A Psychoanalytic Biography," and the adjective makes one anxious. But Stuart Feder knows his music as well as he knows his psychology, and he writes with insight and, when facts are absent, a becoming modesty that make his book triumph over its style (long-winded) and its typeface (minute).

Charles Ives often said that the most important influence on his music was the example and encouragement of his father, George Ives, a professional bandmaster, and Feder, though he sees shadings in the relationship that the son repressed, agrees. The Iveses, he writes, were a "father-son pair" comparable in music "perhaps only to Mozart *père et fils.*" *"My Father's Song"* is a double biography drawing on the son's music, which itself drew on the experiences of both Iveses.

George Ives was born in Danbury, Connecticut, in 1845, the last of five children of a banker. George showed musical talent from an early age; when he was fifteen, he was allowed to study with a German music teacher in New York named Charles Foepple. In 1863, he became a cornet player in the band of a Connecticut artillery regiment. His time in the army was not happy—"three years servitude and one year sick," he later wrote—and at one point, he asked to be made a sentinel and destroyed his cornet.

George Ives did better as a peacetime musician in Danbury, at least at first. Charles was born in 1874 and named, Feder speculates, after Foepple (there were no Charleses in either of his parents' families). It was "an unusual auditory environment by any standard," Feder writes, "as well as [one] in which his father was an extraordinarily strong presence." George Ives practiced at home, where

> music was heard on all the instruments George played—cornet, violin, and piano. . . . He was also given to grunting the rhythms and miming the "tatas" and "doodles" of band instruments as he wrote arrangements. Only slightly beyond the confines of the house was the First Congregational Church, with its hand-pumped organ, which could be heard on Sundays along with the singing of hymns. And behind the house was a hill where on fine days in summer the Ives band would sometimes rehearse.

Feder quotes a newspaper account of one concert when Charles was four years old.

> On the arrival of the evening train of the Danbury and Norwalk Railway there was quite a throng of people and teams in front of the station. The two Bethel bands came by this train and were met by [Ives's] band. . . . In both volume and harmony the music was a success and the three bands moved down the street flanked by throngs of delighted people and followed by an army of teams.

"Music seemed to be everywhere that night," Feder adds, "on the bandstand and beyond—at times stationary, at times moving. It was destined to become one of those memories Charlie would never forget."

George Ives was fond of musical experiments and stunts, some of them eccentric (he would tune glasses of water to intervals not found in normal scales), some of them frankly ludicrous (at one concert, he introduced a "humanophone," consisting of a dozen singers dressed as organ pipes). But when his son's musical gifts began to show, he also gave him a solid grounding in tradi-

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tional theory, using his own student exercise books.

Charles absorbed aspects of his father's life as well as his music. Feder quotes a description, written by Charles in his fifties, of farmers and field hands singing at Methodist camp meetings when he was a boy. Feder points out that by the 1870s, Danbury had become an industrial town. "These details of rural New England life are more characteristic of George's time and had doubtless been told to Charlie by George. Hence Charlie's memory incorporates George's memory."

But there were gaps in Charles's vivid picture of his father. He saw George's military service as entirely heroic, and his musical tinkering as entirely venturesome. He never admitted the fact that he was the more talented of the two. As he approached adulthood, he had to grapple with a fact he could scarcely ignore: that, from a financial standpoint, his father's career was a failure. When the family decided to send Charles to Yale, George became a clerk in the bank his own father had founded in order to earn the tuition. George died of a stroke two months into Charles's freshman year.

Charles never made the mistake of making music his life. After graduating from college in 1898, he took two jobs in New York, as an actuary in an insurance company and as a church organist. When a performance of a cantata he had written received only respectful reviews, however, he quit his musical post and never took another. While he made himself rich in the insurance business, he composed in private, nurtured by his wife, Harmony. Occasionally, Ives's worlds collided. After the United States entered World War I, Ives's dark and dissonant song "In Flanders Field" was performed at a professional meeting at the Waldorf. The baritone who sang it found it "unbearable." "One can imagine," writes Feder, "what the insurance agents who heard it as entertainment at their business luncheon must have thought."

Ives virtually stopped composing in 1918, ostensibly because of a heart attack, though Feder notes that there is scant evidence that he actually suffered one. The more likely cause of his silence, Feder thinks, is that Ives had reached the age at which his father had given up being a bandleader. Ives's composing had been a posthumous collaboration with the man who had introduced him to music in the first place, but "the same dutiful impulse that generated [it] had to call a halt to it. . . . Collaboration was a duty," but continuing past the point at which his father had fallen silent would have been "a transgression."

Feder does not directly address the most important question about any composer, which is, what is good about his music, though the material of his book is relevant to it. Ives's music is a flea market of nineteenth-century melodies and styles, popular, religious, and serious. (Feder argues that Ives was more indebted to Dvořák than he ever let on.) The last style he picked up was ragtime, which he heard not as a blacks-only harbinger of jazz but as a continuation of his father's tradition: "even in the old brass-band days," he wrote, "there was a swinging into off-beats, shifted accents, etc." Ives churned these materials with what we think of as twentieth-century techniques—polytonality, quarter tones, noise—to give the effect of some distorting medium, whether of time, distance, or emotion. The notes may have come from Stephen Foster, but the effect is mysterious or thrilling—or "unbearable," according to taste.

The musical materials, of course, came largely from the "unusual auditory environment" of Ives's home, while the distortions were often supplied by the mental effort of trying to go home again: the distance suggested by a muddied theme was not simply the distance between a listener and a band in the night, but between Ives and a band in Danbury thirty years earlier.

Ives's materials carried a heavy freight of associations. We can share the most general of them: experiencing a tune which seems to come from blocks away and decades ago is the same if we are composing in New York in 1912 or listening in New York in 1992. But

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most of Ives's associations are lost on us, either because they are too personal or too historical. "Rally 'Round the Flag," a favorite Ives building block, was to him a *leitmotif* of the Civil War, in which his father had participated (he thought) gloriously. For us, it is a generic patriotic song, if anything. For listeners a hundred years from now, it will mean nothing. Ferreting out the musical references, as many an Ives scholar has done, is an exercise not in musical criticism but in archeology.

What remains is the material itself—rousing or placid, invariably diatonic—and the transformations which it undergoes. These give a sonic pleasure, independent of our knowledge of nineteenth-century Connecticut. Ives wrote for his own reasons; we listen for ours.

Ives's music is parasitic on earlier or simpler styles of music, but then so is most of the good music of the last hundred years. Schoenberg famously boasted that the twelve-tone system would guarantee the hegemony of German music for three hundred years. He was about 270 years off, and even while he and his disciples held sway, such success as they had was due not to obeying their rules, which have only a paper reality, but to the effect of their productions on ears accustomed to tonality. Bartók succeeds in a similar way, using modal folk music as grist. Jazz depends on "standards"; when it strikes off on its own, it evaporates into empty noodling. Ives's dependence on his father's songs ultimately choked off his talent. But it also gave it something to go on for forty-odd years.

Ives lived until 1954. He won a Pulitzer Prize, and collected admirers. He wrote crazy letters to politicians, became senile, toyed with an unfinishable project—a "Universe" Symphony, to be played by hundreds of musicians, scattered on hilltops. "It's all there," he was overheard saying in his seventies, "the mountains and the fields." But his talent was gone. When he died, he was buried in Danbury, near the grave of his father.

The song of the bow

Seamus Heaney The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' "Philoctetes." Farrar, Straus & Giroux/Noonday, 81 pages, $20; $9 paper

reviewed by John Herington

Once in a while, a first-rate modern poet comes to the rescue of an ancient Greek tragedy, managing to make its people talk again like real people and its songs sound again like real songs. This wonderful thing happened a generation ago to Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, when Robert Fitzgerald (to whose memory, most fittingly, the present book is dedicated) published his translation of it in the Chicago *Complete Greek Tragedies.* Now it has happened to that other masterpiece of Sophocles' extreme old age, the *Philoctetes.* Both plays are of exceptional power and beauty, even for Sophocles. Both stand apart from all other surviving Greek tragedies in that they explore a kind of heroism which a modern can immediately, instinctively believe in and learn from—the heroism of the outcast from society, physically maimed, clothed in tatters, with nothing left to him in this world but his own fierce spirit. It is truly a matter for rejoicing that both are now available to English-speaking playgoers and readers, in versions that sing.

Most educated people know something of Oedipus and the plays about him; but the lone play about Philoctetes that has reached us from classical times may need some introduction for its own sake, if one is to grasp what an exciting literary and theatrical event this new version is. There is much in the *Philoctetes* that simply has no parallel in extant Greek drama, and only remote parallels in the drama of post-classical Europe. One has to look as far afield as *The Tempest*, for instance, to find another play that features a prince with magical powers, marooned by his enemies on a storm-beaten island. At that point, however, the resemblances to *The Tempest* end. It is hard to find anywhere

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in drama a comparable study in utter loneliness, one that asks what happens to a being cut off from humanity for years, crippled by a festering wound so horrible that even the rare visitors to his island have been unable to bear the stench or the screams; and further asks by what miracle of sympathy a barrier like that can be passed, so that the sufferer in the end can become part of humanity again.

But those themes, moving as they are, form only as it were the ground bass to the richly complex music of the *Philoctetes* as a whole. The plot, with an economy unique in late-fifth-century Attic drama, focuses on essentially three characters only, and the shifting relationships between them. These three characters are Philoctetes himself, who in youth received Herakles' bow as that hero lay about to die on his funeral pyre on Mount Oeta, and who thus was marked as the heir to the supreme heroic tradition; Odysseus, who in this play is characterized as a late-fifth-century (one might equally say, late-twentieth-century) sophist whose sole aim is to *win* at whatever cost to honor, truth, the integrity of language, or his fellow human beings; and a young man with his character still unformed as the play opens, Neoptolemos, son to the recently slain Achilles. The Greek army before Troy has just now learned, in the tenth year of the siege, that only Philoctetes and his bow, jointly with Neoptolemos, have the power to achieve the ultimate of all heroic prizes, the capture of Troy. Odysseus and Neoptolemos have been sent to the island by the army with orders to bring back Philoctetes and the bow, and as the play opens we see Odysseus persuading the reluctant Neoptolemos to defy the heroic nature that he has inherited from Achilles and to lure Philoctetes into their power by treachery and lies. From then on the play is essentially a struggle, represented with great delicacy and intensity, for the soul of Neoptolemos. In the end Philoctetes and the values he stands for outweigh the non-values of Odysseus. Besides these three, only two other characters appear in the *Philoctetes*, and only briefly at that: an agent of Odysseus disguised as a merchant in the middle of the play, and Herakles at its shattering finale. The strange and moving fable is commented upon and enriched throughout by a chorus of sailors, the crew of Neoptolemos.

The Prince of Darkness, that best of dramatic critics (for who has had a longer or closer acquaintance with the theater?), is reported by Milton to have characterized the art of Attic tragedy in the following lines:

> Thence what the lofty grave Tragedians taught
> In *Chorus* or *Iambic*, teachers best
> of moral prudence, with delight receiv'd
> in brief sententious precepts, while they treat
> of fate, and chance, and change in human life,
> High actions and high passions best describing.

It is true that one would search vainly for any hint of the qualities here ascribed to the tragic art in our current philological or literary periodicals, or in most of the trade translations of Attic tragedy. Nonetheless, the passage can still be very useful as a measure of the enormous difficulties of translating Attic tragedy adequately under late-twentieth-century conditions. The tests are: Can the translator reproduce in English the choral songs and the iambic speeches—the differences *between* these two discrete modes of expression, and the stylistic gradations possible *within* each mode? Can he or she bring out tragedy's profound underlying concern with "moral prudence"—that is, with right and wrong ways to live? Finally, and not least, can modern English verse contrive anything to approach the "brief sententious precepts," by which I take Satan to have meant that density of texture, that memorableness from line to line, which endlessly delights the reader of tragedies in Greek?

Seamus Heaney's version of the *Philoctetes* passes all these tests triumphantly. His verse seems to command the whole desired range of rhythm and style, from (for example) the magical opening of the song sung by the chorus over the feverishly slumbering Philoctetes—

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Sleep is the god-sent cure.
Deep-reaching, painless, sure.
Its touch is certain.
The light of paradise
Creeps into sleepers' eyes
As through a curtain.

—to the plain and forceful spoken verse of Philoctetes' response to Neoptolemos' news that, while so many of the great heroes have died under the walls of Troy, the ignoble Thersites still lives:

Of course. Of course. What else could you expect?
The gods do grant immunity, you see,
To everybody except the true and the just.
The more of a plague you are, and the crueller,
the better chances of your being turned away
From the doors of death. Whose side are gods on?

All that part of the translator's work has been beautifully done, but what is perhaps the hardest problem of all, whether for translator or for scholar, still remained: to make clear the deeper issues of the play even to oneself, let alone to a modern audience that must be presumed to be unacquainted even with the outline of the Philoctetes legend. Heaney has gone about this in a very interesting way. On the whole, *The Cure at Troy*, though far from being a word-by-word translation, follows the contours of the *Philoctetes* quite closely. There is in fact only one radical change in Sophocles' design, and that occurs on pages 78-80, where the lines that Sophocles gave to Herakles, appearing in divine splendor above the stage, are given instead to the Chorus; this makes sense, because modern playgoers are no doubt less tolerant of a blatantly supernatural finale than ancient Athenians seem to have been. On the other hand, this version, especially at the beginning and end, contains certain non-Sophoclean insertions that, without breaking the dramatic illusion, effect what in a conventional translation would be accomplished by the paraphernalia of introduction, notes, and glossary. By such means ideas that are implicit in Sophocles are tactfully made explicit for the modern audience. Among them are the bond between Philoctetes and Herakles, stressed by allusions to the flames of the funeral pyre on Mount Oeta and to the flames of the volcanic island where Philoctetes is exiled; and the heroic symbolism of the bow, a stage-property whose movements in this play have almost the importance of the movements of a human actor. But the longest and most moving of all the insertions comes very near the end, where Heaney puts into the mouth of the Chorus a little poem of his own on the meaning of the whole Philoctetes story: Here are a few lines from it:

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and they get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured. . . .

History says, *Don't hope*
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.

It is hard to imagine how the "moral prudence" of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* could be better illumined.

Shorter notices

James D. Bloom
Left Letters: The Culture Wars
of Mike Gold & Joseph Freeman.
Columbia University Press, 156 pages, $37.50

I suppose someone had to do it—concoct an earnest analysis, thick with the newest

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jargon, of the literary productions of Mike Gold, who once characterized Proust as "the masturbator of the bourgeois literature," and of Gold's colleague in the Communist literary apparat of the 1930s, Joseph Freeman. The concocter is James D. Bloom, a professor at Muhlenberg College, who in *Left Letters* guides us through, among other intricacies, Gold's "traditionalist nostalgia." This, we are told, "exposes an affiliative identification with the cultural heritage labeled the American Renaissance." And key passages in Freeman's novel *Never Call Retreat* are enriched in their "dialectic deformation" by the "nonverbal analogues" supplied by the canvases of Picasso and the films of Sergei Eisenstein.

Is it unfair to ask what Mike Gold, *soi-disant* "tongue of the working class," would make of learning that he was, after all, "engage[d] with issues that now preoccupy literary theorists"—the theorists being university professors like James Bloom? Gold's own idea of literary theory was the ten-point program articulated at the Kharkov Congress (November 1930) under the auspices of that most far-reaching of metacritics, Joseph Stalin. A delegate at Kharkov, Gold sent home dispatches extolling "the brisk young reporters here, [who] want you to sum up in a few pithy phrases the complete history of American literature and art from the Marxian viewpoint; that's all." That's all, indeed. Gold was soon to become the Cerberus of literary Communism, sinking his teeth into any writer who dared miscalculate the latest turn in the anfractuous Party line.

That *Left Letters* soft-pedals this side of Gold's career is not surprising. What is surprising is Bloom's indifference to the climate in which Gold and Freeman flourished. He ignores the great mobilizing events of the 1930s—there is next to nothing on the Depression, and the only Roosevelt he cites is Theodore. Subtitled "The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman," this study is itself a casualty of campaigns waged much later: the martial tones of another, more famous, Professor Bloom reverberate in the author's remark that the "very title" of Gold's *Jews Without Money* "demonstrates his mastery of intertextual subversion and revisionist antagonism"; and the cadences of 1960s-style Marxism echo in Bloom's complaint that the chapter epigraphs in Freeman's *American Testament* quote "such cultural commodities as Joyce, Gorky, Shelley, Hart Crane, even Nicholas Murray Butler." These pained cerebrations, and others of equal solemnity, succeed only in obscuring further Gold and Freeman, two forgotten but pungent journalists who have much to tell us about the cultural politics of the Old Left. They deserve an analysis that approaches them on these terms—their own terms—rather than one dependent, as Bloom himself puts it, "on literary theorist-politicians now influential in the academy."

—*Sam Tanenhaus*

Norman Manea On Clowns:
The Dictator & the Artist. Translated from the Romanian by Alexandra Bley-Vroman, Cornelia Golna & Anselm Hollo.
Grove Weidenfeld, 178 pages, $18.95

October, Eight O'Clock.
Translated from the Romanian by Cornelia Golna & others.
Grove Weidenfeld, 216 pages, $18.95

For three decades Romania was unrivaled in the Eastern Bloc for the ruthlessness of its dictator and the extent of its state censorship. It is thus no surprise that two works refining and extending Czeslaw Milosz's analysis of intellectuals under totalitarian regimes in *The Captive Mind* have now come from a Romanian writer. Norman Manea was twice exiled from his country, first, in 1941 at the age of five, to a concentration camp in the Ukraine and then, six years ago at the age of fifty, to the United States. As a writer in Romania, he suffered vicious smear campaigns for, among other things, his objections to neo-Fascist editorials in the main Party journal.

Romania's lack of a revolutionary tradition or any uncorrupted organized religion,

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along with its citizens' propensity to political aloofness, left it vulnerable to a dictator at once absolute and ridiculous. In the essays collected in *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist*, Manea vividly recounts, with flashes of wry humor, the horrors of living under Ceauşescu's repressive and sadistic regime. The endless tedium of censorship proceedings and the paranoia engendered by the Securitate, the fifteen police officials for every citizen, and the even more numerous "volunteer informers" ensured that even the most banal of truths would not be openly, or even privately, expressed. In the title essay, Manea skillfully portrays the terrifying absurdity of Nicolae Ceauşescu, a "small provincial tyrant," as supreme ruler. Through a reading of Fellini's text on the traditional hierarchy of clowns, he contrasts the artist as truth-teller, forced to wear the mask of an ineffectual buffoon, with the viciously arrogant, dictatorial White Clown.

The unifying theme of the essays is the indispensability of the individual conscience in any search for truth. Similarly, the paradoxical fragility and vital necessity of the honest, subjective experience drive the masterly stories in *October, Eight O'Clock*. These highly autobiographical stories follow an unnamed protagonist through an early childhood in a concentration camp, an adolescence torn between his Jewishness and visions of a Marxist utopia, and finally through an adulthood filled with disillusion, isolation, and mistrust.

In the early stories, objects and rituals are imbued with numinous meaning: a cube of sugar, for example, symbolizes the civilized world, a world the camp inmates must not give up, because, they firmly believe, it "had not given them up and could not do without them." Later this numinous power adheres to words themselves, to strange new nouns like *radio* and *marzipan*. The boy first betrays this power when he recycles into propaganda for the Soviet Pioneer summer camp the wisdom of the man who had instructed the boy for his bar mitzvah. Years later, in "The Turning Point," the protagonist embarks on an "abstract search for the restoration of dignity" through "brief, illusory, heated" discussion in a secret group that meets at a seaside resort. When one of the members "disappears," the discussions are abandoned and the sea takes on the attributes of the "infinite" that the group had sought in conversation. But after surviving a near drowning and a severe illness caught from the heavily polluted water, the protagonist adopts the "resigned, senile attitude" of his colleagues. The despair caused by the eventual recognition of his self-betrayal dominates the rest of the stories, despite rare glimmers of hope.

While the magical intensity of the early stories diminishes as the protagonist's disillusion grows, the symbolic and intellectual density of the later stories more than compensates for this attrition. Manea's detailed, almost obsessively exact rendering of his characters' emotional states, combined with his elusive, slightly surreal settings, makes incomprehensible horrors accessible to the reader with an immediacy that is reminiscent of works by Primo Levi and George Konrád.

It is more than slightly ironic that at a time when denouncing "individualism" as an outmoded relic of Western patriarchy has reached the very height of intellectual fashion, testaments of those who have paid dearly for exercising their individual conscience are available in unprecedented number. Norman Manea, a self-described "guinea pig of two totalitarian regimes—one Fascist, the other communist"—offers his experiences under these regimes not simply to add to an already mind-numbing catalogue of crimes perpetrated by governments in Eastern Europe, but to warn against the "amorphous leveling . . . of the individual" in any society, regardless of its utopian visions. In these books, Manea issues an urgent, compelling reminder to Western audiences that, contrary to the preferred belief, Romanian totalitarianism was not "some sort of unearthly, demonic aberration, but a human reality that still persists and may indeed revive in other guises as an ideology and as a form of society."

—*Tess Lewis*

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Letters

The tragedy of Yugoslavia

To the Editors:

I am greatly troubled by Richard Tillinghast's article "Rebecca West and the Tragedy of Yugoslavia" in your June 1992 issue.

I have traveled widely in former Yugoslavia in pursuit of my journalistic and scholarly goals, and have read and reread Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, which is the basic topic of Tillinghast's essay. It is a brilliant book, a celebration of Serbian culture, which is indeed very attractive—warm, folkloric, picturesque, rural, and vigorous. It is clear from Tillinghast's article that he shares West's admiration for the Serbs and for Serbian nationalism.

But Serbian history and Serbian extremist claims are not all there is to Balkan history, and with regard to the cultural achievements and historical drama experienced by the other Balkan peoples, neither West nor Tillinghast is fair. For example, Tillinghast quotes West in making an intellectually disreputable contrast between "the medieval, Slavic, Orthodox strain represented by the Serbs" and "the Austrian-influenced Roman Catholic culture of the Croats and Slovenes." The presumption that only the Orthodox cultures are truly Slav, thereby excluding the Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, etc., as well as the Slovenes and Croats, is grossly false and could only be accepted by foreign intellectuals with no real knowledge of Slavic languages and culture.

Croatian liturgical prose represents one of the earliest and most important Slavic literary resources. Indeed, the Serbs themselves "borrowed" much in their intellectual tradition from the Croats and Bosnian Muslims. The Croats are historically closer to the Hungarians than to the Austrians, but that no more makes them un-Slavic than does the Turkish influence on the Serbs. The Serbian argument against the Croats and Slovenes, articulated uncritically by West, comes down to the claim that Catholics and Muslims cannot be not true Slavs. This exactly mirrors the claim made by Russian anti-Semites that Jews and non-Orthodox Christians cannot be true Russians.

Tillinghast, *pace* West, benignly recycles such nationalist-propagandist arguments, and skirts around, in a light-minded way, West's outrageously biased generalizations against Turkish culture. (He seems unfazed, if not amused, by her admission of ignorance, and, early on, declares that "though she may have romanticized and even misinterpreted her Yugoslavian material, she proceeded with a sure hand." This is a bit like saying, "although the master of the wrecked vessel may have misread his chart and steered incorrectly, he proceeded with a sure hand.")

Tillinghast even intimates that, like West, he "would still probably sympathize with the Serbs' sense that they have a right to dominate Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Macedonia." In this and his other few references to the present carnage in former Yugoslavia, Tillinghast writes in an offhand and disingenuous way that I believe has no place in *The New Criterion*.

Tillinghast is wrong to say, as he does at the beginning of his piece, that in the present Yugoslav conflict "both sides have blood on their

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hands." In the Yugoslav war responsibility is *not* equal on both sides, and to say so does not make one an apologist of Croatian or other misdeeds, past or present. The Slovenes committed no offenses against the Serbs; the Bosnians sought nothing but peace and the preservation of their multiethnic existence; and the present generation of Croats had no blood on its hands until the attacks by Serbian irregulars during 1990 and 1991 were supplemented by the neo-Stalinist Yugoslav army's current campaign of murder and destruction.

The extremism produced by the Serbian nationalism about which West and Tillinghast wax lyrical puts West's book more in the category of works written by apologetic travelers to Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany than in that of legitimate travel writing.

Serbian claims defended by West, by Tillinghast, and by the latter's other authority, the Croat-born but Serbophile ornament of the Communist regime Ivo Andrić, have today brought the world such outrages as the bombing of Dubrovnik, the destruction of Vukovar (a little-known museum-city of Baroque architecture), and the horrific siege of Sarajevo. Hundreds of churches and mosques have been destroyed. The Dubrovnik synagogue has been damaged. In Sarajevo, the old Jewish cemetery, unique for the form of its tombstones, has been taken by Serbian gunners as an artillery post, and is now mainly destroyed.

This does not mean that the Slovenes, Croats, Albanians, Slavic Muslims, and other victims of the Serbian onslaught are without faults. But to write sympathetically on Serbian nationalist themes reflects a partisanship that is, at this moment, irresponsible at least. And to say all share an equal guilt reflects a position of moral equivalence that is wholly unacceptable.

Stephen Schwartz
San Francisco Chronicle
San Francisco, Calif.

Richard Tillinghast replies:

To anyone who has read *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* and my article on the book, who knows Balkan history and follows the news coming out of former Yugoslavia, the distortions contained in Stephen Schwartz's letter speak for themselves. In the belief that few readers will have the relevant information at their fingertips, though, and because the issues Mr. Schwartz has raised —though in a skewed fashion—are serious ones, I will discuss several points at some length.

First, in my article I took no position on Serbian nationalism. I admire Serbian art and culture, and respect the Serbs' long history of hardship, sacrifice, and struggle. To extrapolate from there to imply that I approve of their current territorial aggrandizement and policy of "ethnic cleansing" is not only a distortion, it is a slur. Such logic-defying extrapolations typify Mr. Schwartz's letter. From saying I share West's admiration of the Serbs, he presumes an admiration for Serbian nationalism, then comes out with the conclusion, "But Serbian history and Serbian extremist claims are not all there is to Balkan history"—as if either Rebecca West or I endorsed "Serbian extremist claims"!

Mr. Schwartz's attempt to hold the deceased author of a book written over fifty years ago responsible for the butchery in today's Balkans is Politically Correct rubbish. I am appalled by the smear against *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* in his eighth paragraph. Far from belonging "more in the category of works written by apologetic travelers to Stalin's Russia or Hitler's Germany than in that of legitimate travel writing," West's book was written with the purpose of awakening British and American readers to the growing menace of Nazism. As my article makes clear, West did not limit herself to "legitimate travel writing"—whatever that might be. The uniqueness of *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* is that it creates a new genre wherein the history and local circumstances of a particular culture lead to a consideration of how life should ideally be lived. On behalf of Ivo Andrić, a writer of genius in the field of historical fiction, I very much resent seeing him condescended to as "the Croat-born but Serbophile ornament of the Communist regime."

Though Mr. Schwartz describes himself as someone with "journalistic and scholarly goals," his deliberate distortion of the following quotation is highly questionable by any journalistic or scholarly standard. "Tillinghast even intimates," he writes, that "like West, he 'would still probably sympathize with the Serbs' sense that they

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have a right to dominate Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia, and Macedonia.'" My sentence actually begins: "West, though she would be horrified by the savagery of today's Yugoslavia, would still probably sympathize . . ." This appears in the context of my attempt to answer the question "why was Rebecca West such a strong supporter of a Serbian-dominated united Yugoslavia?" when such a position today would seem untenable.

As much as I admire *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, on this and other points my article was critical of Rebecca West. Far from supporting a "presumption that only the Orthodox cultures are truly Slav," I mention that West "gives a sometimes tiresome impression of having personally discovered 'the Slav'—the opposite of everything she dislikes about the British." I would not presume to define who is or who is not "truly Slav."

Since I approach Balkan history as a student of Ottoman history, Turkish language, and Turkish culture, I am astonished to read that I "[skirt] around, in a light-minded way, West's outrageously biased generalizations against Turkish culture." Balkan historians who vetted my article before it was printed even described me as a Turkophile, and I accept that description. The reader may care to refer to pages 16 and 17 of my article, where I correct West's misinformation about the Turkish language and assert that her observations about the Prophet Muhammad "reveal an appalling ignorance of Islam."

Finally, my article was written last March, before the fighting spread to Bosnia. The conflict at that time pitted Serbs against Croats. I stand by my statement that "both sides have blood on their hands." Typical of Mr. Schwartz's cavalier way with grammatical logic is the way he extrapolates from my "both" (Serbs and Croats) to bring in the Slovenes, who as far as I know have "committed no offenses against the Serbs," and the Bosnians, who I agree "sought nothing but peace and the preservation of their multiethnic existence."

In Bosnia the Serbs have resorted to a level of butchery that has shocked the world. It would disturb me terribly if anyone thought the article I wrote was somehow meant to defend their actions. But demonization of the Serbs can only lead to further misunderstanding of the state of affairs. To exempt "the present generation of Croats" from the atrocities committed by Croatian Ustasi during the Nazi occupation may make sense on the level of *individual* responsibility. But Mr. Schwartz's attempt to define the limits of memory could only arise in a culture like our own, where we are, as I said in my article, "ghettoized in the present tense." In a culture where the Battle of Kossovo and the Fall of Byzantium are remembered, Croatian massacres of Serbs, which occurred within living memory of the older generation, are surely not forgotten.

For a balanced account of the Serb-Croat conflict, I recommend BBC journalist Misha Glenny's "The Massacre of Yugoslavia" in the January 30 issue of *The New York Review of Books*. Glenny finds little to choose between Croatian President Franjo Tudjman and Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic. After Croatia declared its independence, Tudjman stripped Serbs of their status as a constituent (*drzavotvoran*) nation within Croatia, eliminated cultural autonomy for the Serbs, forbade the use of the Cyrillic alphabet, replaced all Serbian policemen with Croats, and ubiquitously displayed the red-and-white-checkered Croatian shield, which had been used by the Ustasi Fascists during World War II.

It was more than coincidence that the Serbs' first major attack in Croatia, which took place in July 1991, occurred in Glina, where during World War II the Ustasi massacred a thousand Serbs on the outskirts of town, then herded another eight hundred into the Orthodox church and slaughtered them there. Last year in the town of Zadar Serbs were forced out of their homes and publicly beaten; several were lynched. A large minority of these Serbs fled to Bosnia; what role they have played since violence has broken out can only be surmised. According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, quoted in July in *The New York Times*, "Violations of humanitarian law and of basic human rights perpetrated by all parties to the conflict have reached such a point that they have become common practice." Croatia, incidentally, appears poised to annex the southern part of Bosnia once the fighting ends.

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ART IN THE AGE OF AQUARIUS,1955– 1970

William C. Seitz
Compiled and edited by Marla Price
Foreword by Robert Rosenblum

"A pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric."—Robert Rauschenberg at the beginning of the '60s

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Samuel Lipman is a passionate lover of music, a trenchant critic of its performance, and a controversial essayist of considerable power and cogency.
WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

Concert pianist, critic, festival director, publisher of The New Criterion, *and sometime member of the National Council on the Arts, Lipman has emerged in the United States over the past decade as one of its most influential defenders of conservative high culture.*
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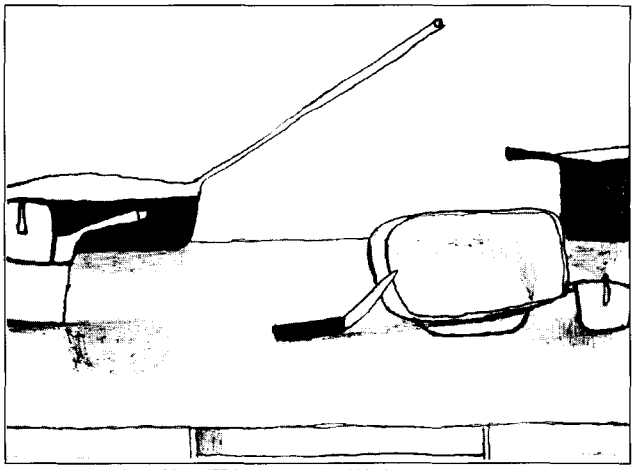

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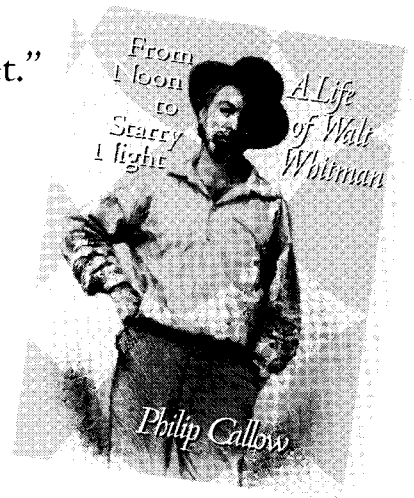

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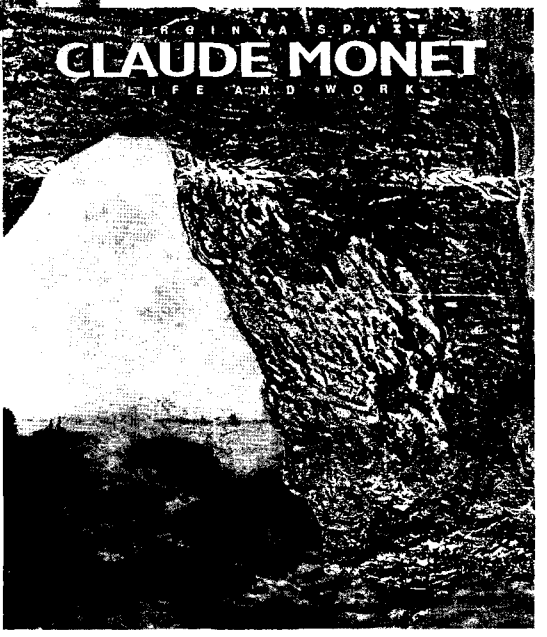

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